Reading Scripture with John Calvin:
1 Peter

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Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 1.1-2

(Wednesday, September 06, 2006)

It is my pleasure to announce the commencement of a new series entitled: "Reading Scripture with John Calvin." I have been looking forward to beginning this series for some time. Indeed, this series was 70% of the impetus for me to start this blog. How is that? The goal of posting this content here is an impetus for me to delve into it myself. Thus, what you are / will be reading is the result of my reading Scripture with Calvin, and I invite you to read Scripture with Calvin and myself.

I will be commenting at different points both on the Scripture passage and on the material from Calvin's commentaries, but primarily on the latter. In a way, I will be mediating Calvin to you. Assume that I am describing Calvin's material unless I otherwise make it clear that I am offering my own reflections (speaking of Calvin in the third person or my explicit use of the first person would be hints of this). Quotations from Calvin will be given in italics or blockquotes. Translation of the passage will be taken from the TNIV. Calvin's own translation will differ so if disparities arise between the language employed in the comments and that given in the citation of the passage it is likely that this is to blame.

May you enjoy reading through this series, for which I plan no end, as much as I enjoy developing it.

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1 Peter 1.1-2

(1) Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, (2) who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

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THE ARGUMENT:

(Herein Calvin offers a summary of the epistle as a whole. Below are the primary points)

- Peter exhorts to denial of and contempt for the world and hope for Christ's kingdom, thereby overcoming adversities.

- Specific moral exhortations are given.

- The example of Christ is called upon to reinforce the understanding that their hardships promote their salvation.

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THE COMMENTARY

"To the elect" – As usually with Calvin, the presence of a word like "elect" gives him an opportunity to briefly discuss predestination. Here he addresses the critical question, based on his teaching elsewhere, of the identity of the elect being hidden. His response is characteristic.

> [W]e are not curiously to inquire about the election of our brethren, but out on the contrary to regard their calling, so that all who are admitted by faith into the church, are to be counted as the elect…

The elect are so "according to the foreknowledge of God," which does not involve our merits. But, so that we don't get lost wondering about the divine decision of election, Peter directs us to the effect of that election, namely, our sanctification.

> [T]here is nothing more dangerous or more preposterous than to overlook our calling and to seek for the certainty of our election in the hidden prescience of God, which is the deepest labyrinth.

"To the sojourners" – Peter has the Jews in view for they are the ones to whom the following notion of exile most directly and clearly applies. It makes sense that Peter would address the Jews since Paul mentioned in Galatians 2.8 that the apostles decided that Peter would go to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles.

"Unto obedience" – Obedience = newness of life and sprinkling = remission of sins. Since Peter takes these to be under the notion of 'sanctification' it is clear that he is using the term differently and more generally than Paul. Sprinkling is an allusion to the OT rite. Calvin engages in type and fulfillment reading:

> For as it was not then sufficient for the victim to be slain and the blood to be poured out, except the people were sprinkled; so now the blood of Christ which has been shed will avail us nothing, except our consciences are by it cleansed. Also, as formerly under the law the sprinkling of blood was made by the hand of the priest; so now the Holy Spirit sprinkles our souls with the blood of Christ for the expiation of our sins.

I am surprised that Calvin does not jump off of this last pair and directly address the contemporary Roman sacerdotal system, but to any attentive reader the connection is plain.

Conclusion:

> [O]ur salvation flows from the gratuitous election of God; but that it is to be ascertained by the experience of faith, because he sanctifies us by his Spirit; and then that there are two effects or ends of our calling, even renewal into obedience and ablution by the blood of Christ; and further, that both are the work of the Holy Spirit. We hence conclude, that election is not to be separated from calling, nor the gratuitous righteousness of faith from newness of life.

With his language about the "experience of faith" as confirmation of election it is easy to see how the tradition would devolve down to Edwards and the "Religious Affections" and its tendency to employ empiricist methods to ascertaining one's own election / salvation or that of others. It should be noted that Calvin decidedly does not make the second move and argues that it is our part to treat fellow Christians charitable and to take their expression of faith and participation in the church at face value with reference to their election. The key question that Calvin does not get into here but that readily comes to mind and cannot long be ignored is that of ascertaining precisely what counts or "the experience of faith" or "newness of life."

It should also be noted that while Calvin pairs election with calling and the righteousness of faith with newness of life, the former are not dependent upon that latter. Rather, the latter necessarily flow from the former. This distinction is the point of Calvin's discussion for God's foreknowledge, which we dipped into above. Finally, note the Trinitarian formula – the Father is mentioned as the originator, the Spirit is the agent, and the Son as the object. It is odd that Calvin does not pick up on this given the uncommonly prominent place of his doctrine of the Trinity in his "The Institutes."

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 1.3-5

(Tuesday, September 12, 2006)

1 Peter 1.3-5

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, (4) and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, (5) who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

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THE COMMENTARY

"Blessed be God" – This opening phrase gives Calvin the opportunity to reiterate one of the things that he set out in the earlier section concerning the argument of 1 Peter as a whole, namely, *to raise us above the world, in order that we may be prepared and encouraged to sustain the spiritual contests of our warfare*. To this end, Calvin thinks that it is important that Peter included further on in this passage a discussion of that which awaits us in heaven. The point is that we should be patient through earthly troubles in view of our heavenly and spiritual blessings.

"And Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" – Here, Calvin sounds a bit more like Barth than one would tend to expect from Calvin (as opposed to Luther, who says this kind of thing all the time). Calvin points out that just as God designated himself from other gods in the past by calling

himself the 'God of Abraham,' going by "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" specifies precisely which God is being spoken about. Indeed, Calvin goes so far to say that:

> [God's] will is, not to be known otherwise than in [Christ]…Whosoever, then, seeks really to know the only true God, must regard him as the Father of Christ; for, whenever our mind seeks God, except Christ be thought of, it will wonder and be confused…

It's a shame that we had to wait until Barth came along to get anything like a consistent, systematic unfolding of precisely what this kind of notion means for Christian theology, that is, for Christian theology to be truly Christian. In any case, Barth didn't come up with it – Calvin (and Luther) said it first, and I'm sure that if one tried one could trace it even further back into the tradition.

"Who hath begotten us again" – Here Calvin fills in a bit of his earlier discussion of predestination by noting that it is important to be born a second time since we were born children of wrath the first time. Furthermore, Calvin understands this notion to reinforce that salvation is a purely gratuitous gift.

"According to his abundant mercy" – At this point Calvin makes one of his famous distinctions between efficient and mediating causes. In the preceding, God is shown to be the efficient cause of our salvation based solely on God's mercy. Now, in the following phrase, the work of Jesus Christ is shown to be the mediating cause whereby this efficient cause is worked out. Next, Calvin makes one of his habitual blunders. Pointing out that it is God's mercy that saves us, he explains that this is accomplished*by the resurrection of Christ; for God does not in any other way discover his mercy*. It is the last bit of this phrase that is troubling, for it implies that God had no mercy toward us until the even of Christ's redeeming and reconciling work. (For a much more scholarly explication of this in Calvin, turn to Bruce McCormack in his essay, "For Us and Our Salvation," in the neighborhood of page 26. McCormack also finds in this kind of statement proof that Calvin has not sufficiently thought through the notion that we only know God through Christ, which we saw Calvin affirm above. McCormack's discussion is short but quite helpful.) First, it should be noted that this is not finally what Calvin thinks, although he tends to talk this way quite regularly (see Calvin's *Institutes* 2.16.3 for a statement of Calvin's own understanding contra what he seems to state here). Second, the problem with this statement is that, if God sent Christ, then God must have had some mercy toward us in the first place. To Calvin's credit, he speaks this way because he feels compelled to by various parts of the biblical text and would rather let the tension they create stand than to overturn them with systematic force – a laudable goal, to be sure.

"Who are kept by the power of God" – This bit is important in terms of a doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. I have heard this doctrine criticized by the argument that it takes away the necessity of good works, morality, ethics, etc. It is often paraphrased by the statement: "once saved, always saved." The problem with this construction is a simplistic notion of salvation as tied to a definitive prayer prayed in the distant past, a moment of placing one's trust is Jesus, etc. But, if we recognize that our salvation is not resident within ourselves but within the work of God, whether you construe that work as predestination or have another way of talking about it, things begin looking much different.

Calvin uses this phrase to discuss faith. He insists that *though we are in the world exposed to dangers, we are kept by faith*. Faith is what connects us to our salvation. Calvin thinks that it thus must be a powerful force. But, he also recognizes that it is also weak.

> Though we are thus night to death, we are yet safe under the guardianship of faith. But, as faith itself, through the infirmity of the flesh, often quails, we might be always anxious about the morrow, were not the Lord to aid us.

The point, for Calvin, is that our salvation would be uncertain – even when considered from the standpoint of faith – except that it is sustained by God's power. Indeed, *faith receives its stability from God's power*. One of my professors, as I have noted elsewhere, likes to put it this way. "Can we lose our salvation? We do so every day. Yet, God knows how to hold onto our hand even when we do our best to let go of his." Were it otherwise, we should have no reason not to despair in every moment. Calvin had that figured out.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 1.6-9

(Tuesday, September 19, 2006)

As I have moved further into this epistle with Calvin, I have become aware of the exciting and yet daunting fact that Calvin has more to say than I have time to properly expound upon. Thus, do not be deceived into thinking that my accounts here are in any way exhaustive. My goal is to hit those points that seem to stand out to Calvin and that stand out to myself. I encourage you to use what I write as a guide to help you find your own way into the richness of Calvin's comments on these Scripture passages.

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1 Peter 1.6-9

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. (7) These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (8) Though you have not seen him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, (9) for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

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COMMENTARY:

In his commentary on this passage, Calvin's discussion deals primarily with a constellation of related themes: the Christian life of joy and suffering, Christ as the ground of hope, and adoption / inheritance. But before I get to those themes, I want to quickly note that Calvin has occasion in this passage to make use of one of the oldest exegetical tools, namely, the notion that Scripture

interprets Scripture. One of Calvin's goals in his commentaries was brevity, and he uses this exegetical tool to attain it with reference to the "manifold temptations" noted in this passage. Calvin sagely sends his readers to his commentary on the first chapter of James for an account of these temptations.

Joy and Suffering

Calvin begins by noting an apparent contradiction in the text. *"But it seems somewhat inconsistent, when he says that the faithful, who exulted with joy, were at the same time sorrowful, for these are contrary feelings."* In explaining this apparent contradiction, Calvin first affirms that Christians have emotions, even the negative emotions. Human life and being is not set aside in the life of a Christian. But, the life of a Christian is grounded in something beyond the emotions aroused by any particular life circumstance, namely, faith. It is faith that allows Christians to rejoice even in the midst of suffering and grief.

This is not the end of the discussion for Calvin. He goes on to order the relationship between grief and joy in the Christian life. In this case, one might expect Calvin to make joy the ground of grief, such that all grief is swallowed up in a greater joy. But, Calvin does just the opposite, and I am still trying to figure out what to make of it. It seems as though his motivation is to maintain the humanity of Christian experience rather than to give the impression that Christian experience is otherworldly in some way. This is how he spells it out:

> "Thus sorrow does not prevent their joy, but, on the contrary, give place to it. Again, though joy overcomes sorrow, yet it does not put an end to it, for it does not divest it of humanity."

Calvin next moves on to discussing the mechanics of why it is that joy can overcome sorrow without dehumanizing sorrow. The first point he brings up is that, because believers do not rebel against the suffering that God sends their way, as opposed to the "reprobate" who rebel against this suffering, believers suffer willingly and therefore with the possibility of joy. The second and predominant point that Calvin deals with here is that notion that *"God does not, without reason…try his people"*. What, then, is this purpose? Purification of the Christian's faith. Developing the illustration that he sees latent in the mention of gold in vs. 7, Calvin draws an analogy between the process of purifying gold and that of purifying faith. Fire is involved in each case, either literally or symbolically, and in each case the product is something far better – or more pure - than the beginning materials. But, purification is only one byproduct of this process. The other is verification, that is, through this testing process false faith is identified.

Christ as the ground of hope

This is the section of Calvin's commentary on this passage that I find most interesting. As he moves to the end of vs. 7, Calvin makes an allusion to the opening verses of Colossians three (although Rev. John Owen, the editor of my version of the commentaries, misses this reference). I think this material worth the trouble of extended quotation:

> *"At the appearing of Jesus Christ*, or, when Jesus Christ shall be revealed. This is added, that the faithful might learn to hold on courageously to the last day. For our life is now hidden in Christ, and will remain hidden, and as it were buried, until Christ shall appear from heaven; and the whole course of our life leads to the destruction of the external man, and all the things we suffer are, as it were, the preludes of death. It is hence necessary, that we should cast our own eyes on Christ, if we wish in our afflictions to behold glory and praise. For trials as to us are full of reproach and shame, and they become glorious in Christ; but that glory in Christ is not yet plainly seen, for the day of consolation is not yet come."

This, for Calvin, is the ground of the Christian hope – the *"invisible kingdom of God"* which, for now, we can only see *"with the mirror of the Word".* I can't help but wish that Calvin could have unpacked some of the pregnant phrases that he penned here. What does it mean for our life to be hidden in Christ and that our life will be revealed in the last day when Christ returns? Calvin leaves this vague and undeveloped. He doesn't go any further than the notion that the benefit of Christian suffering will not be seen until Christ is revealed. But, what if we push Calvin a bit here along the lines that he (should?) have followed? What if the fact that our lives are hidden in Christ means not simply that the meaning of our lives are hidden, but that our lives actually reside in Christ and in Christ's life? For more of a discussion along these lines, see T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*.

But, as I said, Calvin moves in the direction of the revelation of benefits. In other places, this is an insight that I greatly appreciate in Calvin. Calvin does not think that faith is *"a cold notion"*, but that it has an object, namely, Christ. At this point I need to mention the Finnish School of Luther research, which likes to speak about the unity of the gift and the giver. When faith receives the gift, they argue, it also receives Christ. From this they think that they have found grounds for rapprochement with the Eastern doctrine of theosis. (For perhaps the paradigmatic of this kind of reading of Luther, see Manermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*.) These moves are dubious when performed with Luther, and downright silly when attempted with Calvin, although some have tried. Calvin here makes it clear in what sense Christ is grasped by faith. *"[Faith] does not lay hold on the bare name of Christ, or his naked essence, but regards what he is to us, and what blessings he brings."* Thus, it is Christ's 'blessings' or 'benefits' that are grasped by faith, that is, his saving significance.

It is in these benefits that we have hope of salvation, and in fulfilling his function as Mediator by which he secured our salvation, Christ is the ground of our hope.

<u>Adoption / Inheritance</u>

Toward the end of this section of his commentary, Calvin returns if only implicitly to the questions of how suffering relates to joy. This is in keeping with the flow of material found in the passage in question. Here is the formulation that I find helpful:

> "For our adoption ought now to satisfy us; nor ought we to ask to be introduced before the time into the possession of our inheritance."

Here is how this shakes out. We are adopted now, but we will receive our inheritance later (allusion to the parable of the prodigal son should not be missed). Adoption is tied to faith, such that in faith we have the promise of our future inheritance now in the midst of real human life, which for the time being involves suffering. The realness of human life is not temporally overcome through adoption, but is eschatologically overcome through inheritance. And Calvin admonishes us to be content with the eschatological hope, grounded in Christ, of our inheritance.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 1.10-12

(Tuesday, November 21, 2006)

1 Peter 1.10-12

(10) Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, (11) trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. (12) It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

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COMMENTARY:

Calvin's material in relation to this passage can be subsumed under the heading of "The Prophets." There are numerous sub-headings: (1) Antiquity, (2) Calvin's 5 propositions, (3) Patience and Speculation, (4) Sufferings.

Antiquity

As a man of the Renaissance, Calvin had great respect for all things that were really, really old. Indeed, the measure of something's antiquity was for Calvin, as for all humanists of the time, a measure of its dependability and veracity. Thus, it is not surprising that when he sees reference to the prophets in this text he uses it as a chance to assert the antiquity of the Gospel. Making this move is Calvin's second move in this text, and his second to last. His first move is to note the value of salvation, and the last is similar – discussing the value of the gospel as shown by the relation of angels to these matters. To Calvin, Peter *"proves the certainty of the gospel, because it contains nothing but what had been long ago testified by the Spirit of God."*

Calvin's 5 Propositions

These propositions have to do with the relation of the OT prophets to the gospel of Christ. I'll simply reproduce them for our mutual edification:

> "Let the first be this, - that the Prophets who foretold of the grace which Christ exhibited at his coming, diligently inquired as to the time when full revelation was to be made. The

> second is, - that the Spirit of Christ predicted by them of the future condition of Christ's kingdom, such as it is now, and such as it is expected yet to be, even that it is destined that Christ and his whole body should, through various sufferings, enter into glory. The third is, - that the prophets ministered to us more abundantly than to their own age, and that this was revealed to them from above; for in Christ only is the full exhibition of those things of which God then presented but an obscure image. The fourth is, - that in the Gospel is contained a clear confirmation of prophetic doctrine, but also a much fuller and plainer explanation; for the salvation which he formerly proclaimed as it were at a distance by the prophets, he now reveals openly to us, and as it were before our eyes. The last proposition is, - that it hence appears evident how wonderful is the glory of that salvation promised to us in the Gospel, because even angels, though they enjoy God's presence in heaven, yet burn with the desire of seeing it."

By way of quick comment, I think that it is worth noting how diametrically opposed the 3rd and 4th propositions are to the precepts of modern academic Old Testament studies. Not only should the prophets be interpreted within their own context, but also within the context of the Gospel and New Testament which provides the fullness of what was previously given – at least, this is what Calvin suggests to us.

Patience and Speculation

Building on this discussion of the Prophets, Calvin goes on to discuss patience in relation to the knowledge of God. The prophets investigated and inquired about the future of God's promises, indeed, they yearned both to know and to see these things. But, at the end of the day, they restrained themselves and proclaimed only that which had as yet been revealed to them. *"Thus they have taught us by their example a sobriety in learning, for they did not go beyond what the Spirit taught them."* This instinct to turn away from speculating beyond what has been given to us in revelation is a recurrent theme for Calvin (I likely mentioned this and the following already at some point). It often pops up in his discussion of providence and predestination when he reminds his interlocutors of this point. I sometimes wonder if he might have forgotten it a few times himself when considering these matters.

Suffering

We have seen before that Calvin is not slow to talk about the Christian's life of suffering. In addition we have seen some of the ways in which he elaborates on this theme. Here, he introduces the notion that suffering may be endured because suffering must precede glory, a notion that he derives from Jesus' example. Also, because glories are annexed to sufferings for Christians, suffering should not be seen as evil. Besides, we know that *"we are not afflicted by chance."*

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 1.13-16

(Tuesday, October 03, 2006)

1 Peter 1.13-16

(13) Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. (14) As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. (15) But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; (16) for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

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COMMENTARY:

In keeping with our habit of selecting a few themes from within Calvin's broader discussion with which to occupy ourselves, in this installment our thinking will be centered around the notions of "loins," "ignorance," "asymmetry."

Loins

Calvin, like Augustine, is often charged with harboring such a dislike for earthly human existence so as to overlook the positive aspects of that existence. (Side note – in a class about Augustine, one of my professors commented that she thought that Augustine wanted to be an angel. For what its worth…) Leaving aside the discussion of Augustine (although, I do think that the discussion of this aspect of his work is overblown and lacking in nuance), Calvin surprised me in this section. In his discussion of the phrase - "Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind" (glossed in the TNIV translation above) – Calvin rejects those who understand this comment to have something to do with a need to repress sexual desires. Now, to be sure, Calvin does think that this means that we should *"not turn aside to vain affections"* and that we should *"not…be inebriated with the allurements of this world."* But, notice that he does not tell us to turn aside from all affections, just the vain ones. And, he does not tell us to forget the world, but only to forget the allurements of the world. Of course, Calvin would probably be hard pressed to find an "affection" or an aspect of the world that he didn't think was at least in some sense contaminated by sin. Still, what this does suggest is that Calvin does not want to do away with material existence; rather, he wants us to be on guard against the perversion of this existence. For a man who got something like 250 gallons of wine a year as part of his salary, and was widely recognized to have fine and discerning taste in wine, I think Calvin is often unjustly characterized as being against material existence.

Ignorance

Calvin notes that Peter describes the state of existence prior to Christian faith as "ignorance." This gets Calvin a little bit tangled up. He is careful to reject *"that Platonic dogma"* that ignorance is the cause of all sin, but, he does go on to tie ignorance to sin and unbelief. This is how he puts it together:

> "Where the knowledge of God is not, there darkness, error, vanity, destitution of light and life, prevail. These things, however, do not render it impossible that the ungodly should be conscious of doing wrong when they sin, and know that their judge is in heaven, and feel an executioner within them. In short, as the kingdom of God is a kingdom of light, all who are alienated from him must necessarily be blind and go astray in a labyrinth."

It seems to me that the move Calvin is making in all this is that of putting "alienation" ahead of "ignorance" such that "ignorance" stems from sin, instead of the reverse. This would, I am guessing, be borne out in Calvin's discussion of the Fall in his Genesis commentary (I know that the overall structure holds for him on the basis of my research into his doctrine of predestination).

This is only the negative affirmation, the positive side of which Calvin is careful to note as well. That is, he ties knowledge to living properly / morally. *"We are in the meantime reminded, that we are…illuminated as to the knowledge of God, that we may no longer be carried away by roving lusts."* Knowledge is given to us for the purpose of curtailing our sinful behavior. This makes sense insofar as it fits with an "already but not yet" eschatological pattern. The "already" is our knowledge of God, and the "not yet" is the removal of all sin. But, in the meantime, our knowledge of God makes it possible to bring our lives out of sin. Indeed, Calvin states this very directly and evocatively: *"as much progress any one has made in newness of life, so much progress has he made in the knowledge of God."*True knowledge of God necessarily comes with the transformation of one's life. It is easy to see why Barth instinctively liked Calvin, because Calvin has the goal of the transformed Christian life constantly before his eyes.

<u>Asymmetry</u>

This has less to do with material content than with formal pattern. Commenting on verse 13 and the "grace which will be brought to you," Calvin notes with deceptive simplicity that God *"comes of his own will to meet us."* It is not we that go to meet God, but God who comes to meet us. Calvin elucidates further through his paraphrase of this section: *"You have no need to make a long journey that you may attain the grace of God; for God anticipates you; inasmuch as he brings it to you."* We do not find grace, but God brings his grace to us. This theme is again addressed when Calvin comments on the end of this passage where we are adjured to be holy as God is holy. Calvin notes that the our holiness ultimately depends not upon our own work, for, as Calvin says in the voice of God, *"I am he who sanctify[sic – sanctifies] you."* It is God who sanctifies us. How does this fit with Calvin's constant exhortation for us to work actively to change our lives in view of the grace of God as when, a sentence before, he writes that *"we ought to advance in this direction [holiness] as far as our condition will bear"*? The key is the pattern of asymmetry, in which is contained two fundamental moves. First, there are two sides of the given issue (symmetry, of course, means the equality of <u>two</u> disparate yet somehow connected entities). Second, one of the two sides of the given issue has precedence or priority (<u>a</u>-symmetry implies an imbalance or inequality of two disparate yet somehow connected entities). This pattern has great descriptive power when applied to the conjunction of divine and human activity. God's activity is given precedence and priority such that the human activity in question is not conceivable without its being utterly grounded in God's activity. But, at the same time, God's activity does not cancel out human activity, for in an asymmetrical relation both sides

must be present. Human activity still has a role that it can and must play. However, human activity is established and delimited by God's activity such that it follows and affirms God's activity. Thus, in the question of sanctification, it is indeed God that sanctifies us and it is indeed the case that we must actively pursue holiness. For, God's action of sanctifying us establishes our human activity in the pursuit of holiness.

Now, I know that I have not done justice to this notion of asymmetry. Furthermore, without certain other key notions in place around it, one is unable to access the whole of the complexity at hand. But, this is neither the time nor the place, and I am not (yet) the one, to construct a robust account of these matters. But, I have a feeling that, if we read enough Calvin, we will get there.

Until next time!

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 1.17-22

(Tuesday, October 10, 2006)

I would like to say at the outset here that one of the most challenging parts of my task in providing these mediations of Calvin's commentaries to you is in attempting to order the material. Calvin's comments move with the shape of the biblical text, indeed, he keeps to it quite remarkably, resisting spending too much time on tangential matters (often resisting by referring his readers to his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, as might be seen from this quotation from our section today: *"If the reader wishes for more on this subject, he may find it in my Institutes."*). However, I have found that attempting to keep with the movement of the biblical text and Calvin's comments would have the effect of protracting these reflections of mine to at least the length of Calvin's comments themselves, and that would be counter-productive. Simply know that I am ordering the material and that all the shortcomings of my individual subjectivity are included in this ordering. Let this be an impetus to you for consulting Calvin's commentaries directly for your edification. In fact, it would be quite gratifying to me if some of you began reading along and offering your own reflections on Calvin's words in the comments sections associated with the posts on the various passages. But, enough clearing of the throat!

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1 Peter 1.17-22

(17) Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, love out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. (18) For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, (19) but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. (20) He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. (21) Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. (22) Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.

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COMMENTARY:

The passage under consideration today will be approached in terms of the following categories: (1) True Faith and Ethics, (2) Type, Fulfillment and Remnant, (3) An Excursus into Reformed Scholasticism: The Infralapsarian Pattern, (4) Christ as Mediator.

True Faith and Ethics

In his comments Calvin immediately takes up the question of true faith and its relation to ethics and the relationship between these two things will be in the background of all else that he has to say in this section. But, of course, he does this in order to mirror the concerns of these verses, which begins and ends with this consideration.

The first thing that Calvin does is to insist that *"we by no means discharge our duty towards God, when we obey him only in appearance…He not only prescribes laws for our feet and hands, but he also requires what is just and right as to the mind and spirit."* (Brief aside: I find it interesting that Calvin reaches for 'spirit' as opposed to 'heart' here, especially since it shows up very soon after.) This is to be remembered despite the fact that the biblical text mentions of God judging according to "works." Lest we understand the term 'works' to refer only to external things, Calvin notes that *"what will be regarded will be the real sincerity of the heart. In this place faith also is included in the work."* (Of course, 'work' here refers only to the word in question in the text, not to the theological concept of 'works.')

What this amounts to is the necessity of fear. We should be fearful because we recognize that the sincerity of our hearts is always in question. Calvin notes that fear stands opposed to *"heedless security"* in matters of salvation. Furthermore, we should fear because we know how valuable is the blood of Christ, which secured our salvation. Indeed, it is through Christ's blood that we have been redeemed from that which entangled us before, including the tradition received from our forefathers, which Calvin identifies as Judaism.

(Aside: We will return to the notion of fear again in the 'Christ as Mediator' section. Indeed, it is at this point that we must break off linear discussion of Calvin's comments and leap to the end of this section. We will return to this point in the discussion with the section on 'Type, Fulfillment and Remnant.')

God looks at the sincerity of the heart in his judging of us and we should be concerned about this because we know that we do not measure up and we do not want to devalue Christ's blood shed for our salvation. Thus far Calvin's discussion of true faith. But, how does this relate to 'ethics' understood as the way in which one lives out one's life – that is, external as opposed to internal morality? Calvin picks up this question in his comments on verse 22, which he paraphrases as follows: *"Your souls are to be purified, but as ye cannot do this, offer them to God, that he may take away your filth by his Spirit."* Here Calvin reintroduces the asymmetry required to prevent his account from depending solely upon human initiative. But, Calvin moves on from here and notes that *"purity of soul consists in obedience to God."* This is significant because Calvin has

just taken an interior category ('soul') and cast it in light of an external category ('obedience'). And what is this obedience? Calvin's answer, in keeping with the verse in question, is that it consists in love of the neighbor. Calvin places a high premium on love of the neighbor in this section. He writes: *"[Peter] now reminds us what God would have us to cultivate through life, that is, mutual love towards one another; for by that we testify also that we love God; and by this evidence God proves who they are who really love him."*

To sum up: The effect of Calvin's treatment of true faith and ethics here is that he inseparably links them both, and equally undermines them both. He links them by joining the internal category of soul to the external category of obedience. This likewise subverts the notion of true faith when understood solely as interiority. In addition, his establishment of the requirement of true faith and sincerity of the heart undermines reliance purely upon external behavior in one's hope for salvation. The only sure place to stand, as Calvin hints at in his paraphrase of verse 22, is invocation.

Type, Fulfillment and Remnant

We departed from a linear progression just as Calvin had drawn our attention to the point that our salvation depends on Christ's blood and not the traditions of our fathers, which he takes to refer properly to Judaism (and improperly to *"the Papists"*). We have discussed the Reformed pattern of type and fulfillment as a way of interpreting the Old Testament in relation to the New. That apparatus is well represented here as Calvin elucidates the sacrificial imagery found here in relation to Christ – that Christ is a lamb without blemish or defect. In Calvin's hands (as in the hands of others) the Old Testament sacrificial system, though abolished, serves to teach us about the inner logic of Christ's sacrifice.

> *"Moses ordered a whole or perfect lamb, without blemish, to be chosen for the Passover…Peter, by applying this to Christ, teaches us that he was a suitable victim, and approved by God, for he was perfect, without any blemish; had he had any defect in him, he could not have been rightly offered to God, nor could he pacify his wrath."*

But, Calvin – in rejecting the Old Testament order as type and abolished in light of fulfillment – does not want to give the impression that all the people of Israel misused the light given to them. Rather, citing the cases of Paul's forebears (2 Tim. 1.3-5), he argues that *"God ever had at least a small remnant among that people, in whom sincere piety continued, while the body of the people had become wholly corrupt, and had plunged themselves into all kinds of errors."* It is because of this falling away of the vast majority of Israel that Peter brushes aside the traditions of the fathers in this passage, for this refers to the errors and not to the truth hidden in the types and understood as such by the remnant.

An Excursus into Reformed Scholasticism: The Infralapsarian Pattern

Verse 20 declares that salvation in Christ was foreordained, that is, chosen before the creation of the world. As a way into this subject and what it entails, I will quote Calvin at some length.

> *"For it was not a common or a small favour that God deferred the manifestation of Christ to that time, when yet he had ordained him in his eternal council for the salvation of the world. At the same time, however, he reminds us, that it was not a new or a sudden thing as to God that Christ appeared as a Saviour; and this is what ought especially to be known. For, in addition to this, that novelty is always suspicious, what would be the stability of our faith, if we believed that a remedy for mankind had suddenly occurred at length to God after some thousands of years? In short, we cannot confidently recumb [to lean on in a comfortable resting position – I had to look it up] on Christ, except we are convinced that eternal salvation is in him, and has always been in him."*

The trick comes with the question that Calvin raises to himself, namely, this: How can the solution come before the problem in that Christ was ordained a savior before the world began even though Adam did not sin until after the world began? It is precisely this question that exercised Reformed theologians during the period of Reformed scholasticism in the 17th century, within which context the canons of Dort were established. This is the (in)famous TULIP – Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. This is not the place to explicate these canons, but I would like to give some of the background.

There were two camps on the 'orthodox' side of Reformed dogmatics (that is, not the 'Arminians'). They were the Infralapsarians and the Supralapsarians, and they differed on precisely how to make sense of Christ's being foreordained before creation and Adam sinning after creation. The Supralapsarians were definitely the more technically consistent of the two. They basically argued that God set the whole thing up so that Adam would sin and so that the elect could be saved through Christ. The Infralapsarians, on the other hand, didn't like the sound of that. They didn't want to say that God caused evil and the Fall in such a direct manner. So, they accounted Christ's foreordination pre-Fall to God's foreknowledge. That is, God knew what Adam would do with his free will, and established a means for restoration even before the fact. Now, where the Supralapsarians had to come up with a good explanation for why God would cause the Fall, the Infralapsarians had to come up with a good explanation for why God foreknowing the Fall isn't the same as God causing it, since (presumably) once God foreknew it there could be no change. Incidentally, Francis Turretin is a good person to go to if you want further explication of the Infralapsarian position.

The foregoing discussion was undertaken in order to situate Calvin in light of those who would be his followers. In this passage, Calvin clearly falls on the side of the Infralapsarians. Again, I will quote Calvin at some length.

> *"My reply is, that this is to be referred to God's foreknowledge; for doubtless God, before he created man, foresaw that he would not stand long in his integrity. Hence he ordained, according to his wonderful wisdom and goodness, that Christ should be the Redeemer, to deliver the lost race of man from ruin. For herein shines forth more fully the unspeakable goodness of God, that he anticipated our disease by the remedy of his grace, and provided a restoration to life before the first man had fallen into death."*

Christ as Mediator

We come at last, and (after 2000 words) at the end of our strength, to 'Christ as Mediator.' It should be said that last semester I wrote a term paper on the topic of Calvin's Christology, and in particular, on how Calvin conceives of Christ's mediation. If you are very considerably interested in this topic, I would consider sending this paper to you should you ask. In any case, Calvin has a twofold structure in this section. Why do we need a mediator? First, because God is incomprehensible to human powers, we are not able to ascend to him. Second, because we rightly fear God and this fear is an impediment to reconciliation with God, i.e., we would not approach God even if we could (which we can't). Thus, Christ mediates in two ways. First, Christ makes God known to us in a manner in which we can receive knowledge of God. This is the foundation of Calvin's understanding of divine accommodation or condescension. Second, the way in which Christ comes to us is intended to remove the dread of God which we properly possess because of our sinful state. To sum up: Christ mediates in such a way as to make God known in God's graciousness and mercy towards humanity, such that human persons can (a) know God as a God of grace.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 1.23-25

(Tuesday, October 17, 2006)

1 Peter 1.23-25

(23) For you have been born again, nor of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. (24) For, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass wither and the flowers fall, (25) but the word of the Lord endures forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.

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COMMENTARY:

Calvin's comments on these verses were much more brief than usual, but then again, these verses are brief. They also mark the end of chapter 1, so we can now rejoice in having made a good beginning of this project of reading Scripture with Calvin. Further reason for self-congratulation is that we have made it through 60 pages of Calvin's commentaries! This excites me and I hope that it excites you as well. This has been a very rewarding undertaking thus far.

We will discuss two themes in light of today's material: (1) Calvin's Ethical Imperative (2) Calvin's understanding of the 'word' of the Lord.

Calvin's Ethical Imperative

One of the reasons that Barth found Calvin to be more helpful than Luther is that Barth found in Calvin someone who shared his (Barth's) concern with Christian ethics. In Barth's judgment, Luther was preoccupied with the relation between humanity and God (and Barth recognized that

this requires quite a bit of attention), but what he found in Calvin was someone who moved past this to consider relations between human persons in light of the relation between a person and God. (For a convenient place to get in on this discussion, see Barth's *Theology of John Calvin*, in the neighborhoods of page 49 and page 73.) Calvin's comments on our verses for today display his concern in this area, and shows that though he at many points focuses on ethical imperatives, he also has an ordering principle in his understanding of the relation of Christian ethics to salvation.

> "[S]ince they were new men and born again of God, it behoved them to for a life worthy of God and of their spiritual regeneration…The object, then, of Peter was to teach us that we cannot be Christians without regeneration; for the Gospel is not preached, that it may be only heard by us, but that it may, as a seed of immortal life, altogether reform our hearts."

In this passage Calvin reveals the nature of his ordering of these two concepts. The life of Christian ethical responsibility flows out of regeneration. It is regeneration that gives rise to the impetus for a form of life befitting those loved of God and reborn by God. But, note also the close association that Calvin maintains between regeneration and ethical imperative. Regeneration is about reforming our hearts. It might seem like we should take "heart" here to represent that facet of human existence that governs religious life, but the notion of "reform" pushes us to a fuller understanding. This notion of "reform" is set apart from the immediately preceding notion of "immortal life," which is a reference to the promise of resurrection and eternal existence with God. "Reform" of the "heart" is an outgrowth of this seed of immortal life. The Christian life of ethics is lived as a natural outgrowth of our regeneration. We cannot lead this life without regeneration, and we cannot be truly regenerated if in some sense this life does not arise within us.

<u>Calvin's discussion of the 'word'</u>

Calvin reflects on the 'word' a great deal in these few short pages, but I must confess that I find it hard to make heads or tails out of the cumulative effect. Part of the problem is that it is sometimes hard to discern precisely what 'word' is referring to at any given moment. However, there is one strain that I would like to elucidate a bit here.

The first mention shows up with reference to the phrase "enduring God" in the first verse, which Calvin has translated as "living." He then ties this to Hebrews 4:12, where the 'word of God' is called 'living and active.' Thus, Calvin construes God's perpetual activity in terms of 'the word,' and writes that *"he refers to the word, in which the perpetuity of God shines forth as in a mirror."* It is this metaphor of the 'word' as 'mirror' that interests me. To figure out more of what this means, we must turn to Calvin's last sentence in this section (Calvin has other interesting things to say about the Word in the intervening sections, mentioning how it can communicate to us *"what is real, solid, and eternal,"* and noting that he is not concerned with any kind of hidden word that might reside in the inner subjectivity of God and that he is instead interested only in the visible word, etc.) where Calvin touches upon something that I like to call "mediating instrumentality" (as far as I know, that's my own phrase). Calvin is here discussing preaching. Having already noted that *"the word is not to be sought elsewhere than in the Gospel*

preached to us" (and thereby hinting at tying our knowledge of God to Christ in a way that would make TF Torrance proud), Calvin thinks briefly about the mechanics of preaching in relation to God's redemptive action.

This is clearly a question of the relationship between divine and human activity. In what sense is the work of the Spirit involved in human preaching? There are many ways to construe the relation to divine and human agency: in terms of a causal chain, in terms of God starting and us finishing, in terms of us starting and God finishing, etc. Calvin has a different idea. Instead of construing this relation in causal or temporal categories (one agency preceding or causing the other), Calvin adopts a more simultaneous understanding where both agencies are present at the same moment. He writes: *"the voice which is in itself mortal, is made an instrument to communicate eternal life."* Here, the human voice in the act of preaching is accomplishing an action that requires divine activity. And yet, the voice is not accomplishing divine activity; rather, divine activity is coming alongside the voice and communicating itself through the instrument of the human voice. Thus, my term – "mediating instrumentalities" – creaturely media are taken up by God and are made into instruments to mediate divine activity. It is here that Calvin's use of the 'mirror' as a metaphor is apt. A mirror is never anything other than a mirror, and yet it communicates that which gives itself to be reflected in it. The mirror does not posses the reflection, but when the object to be reflected presents itself to the mirror, the mirror functions as a mediating instrument in communicating the reflection.

I feel as though I have expressed myself poorly in this regard, but I trust that you can see the broad strokes. God uses creaturely 'things' as 'mediating instrumentalities' to communicate some 'thing' to us. Precisely what is communicated is a question for another day and, I must admit, a much more difficult question.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 2.1-5

(Tuesday, January 02, 2007)

1 Peter 2.1-5

(1) Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. (2) Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, (3) now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. (4) As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by human beings, but chosen by God and precious to him – (5) you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

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COMMENTARY:

This section was not quite as interwoven with interesting themes, at least to my eyes, as the last few section have been. But, there are quite a few intriguing tidbits that I want to place before us. We have seen some of them before, but it is good to get a sense of how different ideas in Calvin

keep popping up. Here is what we will cover: Ethics Follows Regeneration, Got Milk?, Mirror, Mirror, One Temple, Acceptable Spiritual Sacrifices.

Ethics Follows Regeneration

I am constantly impressed by the constant presence of this theme in Calvin. It is unthinkable for Calvin that one could be regenerated without a corresponding change in life. However, I'm not feeling particularly inspired in writing about this at the moment, so I'll simply quote a couple of Calvin's discussion of the topic found in this passage.

> "After having taught the faithful that they had been regenerated by the word of God, he now exhorts them to lead a life corresponding with their birth. For if we live in the Spirit, we ought also to walk in the Spirit, as Paul says. It is not, then sufficient for us to have been once called by the Lord, except we live as new creatures."
>
> "[Peter], in short, urges this, that new morals ought to follow a new life."

Got Milk?

When I was growing up, there was s fair bit of discussion in my ecclesiastical circles (I'll let you figure out what those circles might be) about what the "milk of the word" was. This terminology shows up in a few places, and Calvin notes them in his treatment. He concedes the interpretation that I had always grown up hearing – that the "milk" is simple teaching – as accurate in the other instances of this term. However, he thinks that it is incorrect here. Instead, Calvin writes: *"[M]ilk, here, is not elementary doctrine, which one perpetually learns; and never comes to the knowledge of the truth, but a mode of living which has the savour of the new birth, when we surrender ourselves to be brought up by God."* Milk, then, is a manner of life befitting infancy, which Calvin characterizes in this passage as being free from guile, i.e., as innocent. This is the mode of life that comes with new life in Christ.

One interesting corollary to this for Calvin is his discussion of infancy. We tend to think in terms of the life cycle, and therefore we think of infancy as a temporary thing. That is certainly true if milk is elementary doctrine. But, if it is the fitting mode of life for a Christian, then it is not temporary. Thus, Calvin says that *"the infancy of the new life is perpetual."* Perpetual infancy? What kind of imagery is this? Well, if I wanted to develop this seed of Calvin's thought (which I do), I would note that infancy is the beginning of life as innocent. Infants posses nothing. They live only in the present. They recognize no past and no future. This is the mode of life that is befitting a Christian. Possessing nothing, living in the moment of faith with an innocence that is perpetually renewed by the Spirit of God.

Mirror, Mirror

It occurred to me that it might be interesting to keep track of when Calvin uses his mirror metaphor. It shows up here in his discussion of verse 1. It is only a passing reference, and the force is that in the few vices listed in this verse we are meant to see all of our vices as though we were looking into a mirror.

One Temple

This point arises in Calvin's discussion of the spiritual house that Christians are being built into, *a la* verse 5. Calvin drives home the fact that, even though Scripture calls each Christian a temple of God in some passages, the point that we find here has to do with the Christian community. It is the community that is being made into this house, this temple. Because we can never hear enough about how the Christian community takes precedence over the Christian individual, I'm going to quote Calvin's own formulation here.

> "Peter no doubt meant to exhort the faithful to consecrate themselves as a spiritual temple to God; for he aptly infers from the design of our calling what our duty is. We must further observe, that he constructs one house from the whole number of the faithful. For though every one of us is said to be the temple of God, yet all are united together in one, and must be joined together by mutual love, so that one temple may be made of all. Then, as it is true that each one is a temple in which God dwells by his Spirit, so all ought to be so fitted together that they may form one universal temple. This is the case when every one, content with his own measure, keeps himself within the limits of his own duty; all have, however, something to do with regard to others."

Acceptable Spiritual Sacrifices

We often think of Jesus as mediating salvation to us, but we seldom think of Jesus as mediating something from us back to God. But, as TF Torrance and George Hunsinger are quick to point out, Christ mediates both ways. God comes to us through Christ, and we go to God through Christ. Now, I don't mean to imply that Calvin has this carefully worked out in this section of his commentary, but the pattern of upward mediation is present in Calvin's discussion of verse 6 and acceptable spiritual sacrifices.

Calvin wants to spur us on to good works. He notes here that this passage is beneficial because it *"declares that what is required is acceptable to God, lest fear should make us slothful."* That is, we are required to do something, and to make sure we don't get lazy because we don't see the value in doing it, we are assured that God does accept these spiritual sacrifices. But, Calvin also wants to make sure that we don't get cocky. It isn't that we can offer acceptable sacrifices to God on the basis of our own capability. If this were the case, there would be no need for Christ – i.e., this would be very close to what commonly passes under the name of Pelagius. Instead, Calvin frames things this way:

> "There is never found in our sacrifices such purity, that they are of themselves acceptable to God; our self-denial is never entire and complete, our prayers are never so sincere as they ought to be, we are never so zealous and so diligent in doing good, but that our works are imperfect and mingled with many vices. Nevertheless, Christ procures favour for them…we offer sacrifices through Christ, that they may be acceptable to God."

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 2.6-8

(Monday, January 29, 2007)

1 Peter 2.6-8

[6] For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." [7] Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," [8] and, "A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.

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COMMENTARY:

Calvin's comments on this material have to do mostly with the following notions: "Salvation in Christ," "Ecclesiology," and "The Rock." Of course, the first two of these things are tied together, and this is something that Calvin clearly sees. We have evidence of this when he writes, *"there is no building up of the Church without Christ; for there is no other foundation but he."* But, language being linear, we will treat them sequentially. The latter is just an interesting tidbit.

Salvation in Christ

"[A]ll our salvation is found only in him," declares Calvin. This is clearly Calvin the Protestant speaking. Justification by grace through faith alone is central to Calvin's thought, even if it isn't at the head of the *Institutes* and even if he puts his discussion of Regeneration ahead of it in book 3 of the *Institutes*. Historically speaking, it is this doctrine that demanded one's breaking with Rome. Problems of systemic decay can be addressed from within, but if the proclamation of the way of salvation is incorrect, you best get off the sinking ship!

Of course, this is tied into Luther's burning existential question of how one is to find a gracious God. Under the Roman system of the time as commonly perceived, and on bad days actively taught, one's salvation depended upon whether one could confess and do penance for all of one's sins. If you forgot something, you were in trouble. In this sense, one's salvation depended on one's own ability to make use of the sacerdotal system. This discussion has to do with some technicalities surrounding the notions of condign and congruent grace, but I don't really feel like getting into all that. The point is that the reformers wanted to ground our salvation not on our action, but on Christ. Thus, Calvin can say this: *"And it is a valuable truth, that relying on Christ, we are beyond the danger of falling."*

The logic behind how all of this works depends upon how one thinks of Christ's value for salvation. Does it depend solely on himself, or does it depend on what we do with him? The former is the more Reformational, and the latter is the more Roman of the time (although, the case could be made that latter Protestants fell into this trap as well). Calvin is clearly in the first camp on this issue:

> *"Christ is a precious stone in the sight of God; then he is such to the faithful. It is faith alone which reveals to us the value and excellency of Christ. But…the Apostle…adds another clause respecting the unbelieving, that by rejecting Christ, they do not take away the honour granted him by the Father"*

End result? Christ and the value of Christ, though only seen through faith, is independent of our faith. Our salvation is firmly established in him, whether we realize it or not.

Ecclesiology

I don't have much that I want to highlight here, even though Calvin discusses more than I will mention. What strikes me is the issue of how to understand the relation between divine and human agency with reference to the church. Calvin argues that *"God…alone forms and plans his own Church…He, indeed, employs the labour and ministry of men in building it; but this is not inconsistent with the truth that it is his own work."* How can human persons participate in God's work? Is it by making use of a system of grace made available, in parallel to what we saw in our discussion of salvation? Unlikely, since Calvin falls so squarely against such notions in his understanding of salvation. So, how should we parse this? If I were feeling more energetic I would likely come up with some way to bring Barth in here, but I'm not going to. I will say, however, that though Calvin ultimately ends up determinist (my own personal conviction), on some of his better days he could sound like he might go in Barth's direction on the relation between divine and human agency (not the Barth of the second section in *CD* IV/4). This is a passage where it isn't clear which way Calvin can / will go. But, the solution is nicely charted even though the details aren't filled in.

The Rock

> *"For as the firmness and stability of Christ is such that it can sustain all who by faith recumb on him; so his hardness is so great that it will break and tear in pieces all who resist him. For there is no medium between these two things – we must either build on him, or be dashed against him."*

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 2.9-10

(Monday, February 19, 2007)

1 Peter 2.9-10

[9] But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. [10] Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

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COMMENTARY:

Calvin's commentary on these two verses is quite short – only about 3 full pages. But, there are some very good bits. Despite these good bits, I'm not feeling as though I have much to say about them. So, I'll just give you some of the good quotes with minimal comment from myself.

One thing I will say, however, is that Calvin makes good use of his tactic of paraphrasing in his own words what the author meant in writing a given verse or sentence or phrase. This is one of my favorite of Calvin's exegetical tools because it makes perfectly clear what Calvin is up to and how he is reading the passage in question, not to mention the fact that it generally yields very quotable sections.

One (other thing) thing I will say is that Calvin opens this section with a comment about the separation of believers from unbelievers. In keeping with one of his three goals for church discipline, this is necessary in order to keep believers from being negatively influenced by those acting like non-believers. The other two goals for church discipline in Calvin's thought are: first, the honor of God in that those who do not behave as believers should ought not to be called believers, and in that the Lord's Supper should be administered with discernment; and second, the well-being of those under discipline in that discipline is medicinal and aimed at the betterment of the person in question. It is important to remember, however, that even excommunication in Calvin's teaching on discipline does not equal a pronouncement that a person is reprobate, for only God knows this. Rather, it is a pronouncement that this person has persisted without repentance in ungodly behavior and thus must be excluded from the Supper and the community. But, enough about that – on to some Calvin quotes!

"God gave to the fathers an earthly taste only of these blessings,…they are really given in Christ. The meaning then is, as though he had said, "Moses called formerly your fathers a holy nation, a priestly kingdom, and God's peculiar people: all these high titles do now far more justly belong to you; therefore you ought to beware lest your unbelief should rob you of them."

"[T]he Lord hath called us, that he might possess us as his own, and devoted to him."

"There is in the *royal priesthood* a striking inversion of the words of Moses; for he says, 'a priestly kingdom,' but the same thing is meant. So what Peter intimated was this, 'Moses called your fathers a sacred kingdom, because the whole people enjoyed as it were a royal liberty, and from their body were chosen the priest; both dignities were therefore joined together: but not ye are royal priests, and, indeed, in a more excellent way, because ye are, each of you, consecrated in Christ, that ye may be the associates of his kingdom, and partakers of his priesthood. Though, then, the fathers had something like what you have, yet ye far excel them. For after the wall of partition has been pulled down by Christ, we are now gathered from every nation, and the Lord bestows these high titles on all whom he makes his people.'"

NB how in the above quote the priesthood of believers is not an independent priesthood but a sharing in the priesthood of Christ. We have spoken of the mediation of Christ in ways similar to this before. Again, see the work of T.F. Torrance for a contemporary exposition of this theological theme.

"And the sum of what he says is that God has favoured us with these immense benefits and constantly manifests them, that his glory might by us be made known: for by *praises*, or virtues, he understands wisdom, goodness, power, righteousness, and everything else, in which the glory of God shines forth. And further, it behoves us to declare these virtues or excellencies not only by our tongue, but also by our whole life."

"We must also notice what he says, that we have been *called* out of darkness into God's marvelous or wonderful light; for by these words he amplifies the greatness of divine grace. If the Lord had given us light while we were seeking it, it would have been a favour; but it was a much greater favour, to draw us out of the labyrinth of ignorance and the abyss of darkness."

"[W]hen they are gathered in Christ, from no people they really become the people of God…It is then God's gratuitous goodness, which makes of no people a people of God, and reconciles the alienated."

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 2.11-12

(Monday, April 02, 2007)

1 Peter 2.11-12

[11] Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. [12] Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

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COMMENTARY:

I should begin by admitting that this is, in my opinion, one of the more powerful passages in the New Testament. At some existential level, this simply rings true. It also rings true throughout history. It was the morality of Christians that gained the church admirers in the years before Constantine, and it was much the same for Judaism before that (well, morality and antiquity in this case). The various Reformers were appalled by the general lack of morality among the Roman church, and the strict exercise of church discipline by the Reformed produced a morality that withstood hostile regimes before it was undermined by modernity. Even in the present day, people respect the simple morality of the Amish and various other Christian sects.

Should this surprise us? Not in light of the passage before us. For in this passage we find the suggestion that the life of Christian morality may in fact be sacramental in the sense that it bear physical witness to the Gospel. On the basis of our lives live in ethical witness and response to the Gospel, people may be drawn to and glorify God. Maybe we should worry less about clever worship styles and more about the shape of our lives before God and the world. Just a thought…

But, enough of my pontificating and on to Calvin. Like last time, his comments on these verses

are very short. Nevertheless, we'll hit two points: Guests and Lusts, and God is Coming for a Visit.

Guests and Lusts

Calvin, following Peter, notes that we are strangers, aliens or guests in this world. But, what does this mean? Calvin does not offer us an explanation for "what" but does answer the question of "why." Peter says this – because when we recognize that we are just guests here, we aren't tempted by the lusts of the flesh. This is kind of the difference between moving to a different country and visiting a different country. In the first instance, one feels somewhat obliged to become a part of the local culture, eating their food, wearing their clothing, learning their language, etc. When visiting, one really just wants to take care of what you have come to take care of, even if that means sampling the food, buying a few articles of clothing, learning a few phrases in the local language, etc. Even if the motivation for our trip is the other culture, we are not interested in becoming a part of the other culture.

Thus, that we are guests in this world means that we should not be interested in becoming part of this world, even if we are passing through and some of the lingo is helpful, etc.

We need to add another dimension to this. We are not told that we are guests in this world to discourage us from participating in the salutary aspects of this world, only the detrimental. Think again of our analogy of visiting another country. Knowing that we are guests or visitors does not mean that we cannot enjoy the local food, etc. We should just beware of the local vices. Furthermore, we know that – to stretch out analogy even further – if we eat the local food, we are going to need to drink the local drink that best compliments the food. However, we soon discover that both the food and the drink in excess leads to addiction or some other malady. In fact, this is a malady that afflicts the local population. If we were part of the local population, we would surely also be afflicted. But, we are not. We have the choice to moderate our consumption. And, low and behold, moderate consumption of the food and drink in question turns out to be salutary not only to our health but also to our state of mind.

What I've been trying to get at with all this is that Calvin is not against physical existence. He rather likes it as witness by both his love of fine wine and his adamant defense of the freedom of a Christian in the moderate use of God's creation – not only utility use but use tied to enjoyment. This is acceptable for Calvin, as long as the use of the particular thing in question is not ruled out by Scripture and as long as that use is "indifferent." That is, even though we enjoy our fine wine, we could stop drinking it should the love of God and our neighbor necessitate it for a time. I offer the following from Calvin's comment:

> "By the *lusts* or desires *of the flesh* he means not only those gross concupiscences which we have in common with animals…but also all those sinful passions and affections of the soul, to which we are by nature guided and led. For it is certain that ever thought of the flesh, that is, of unrenewed nature, is enmity against God."

The key here is that we aren't talking about nature as creation, but nature as fallen. Sure, our sexual desire was good in its created form. Now, not so much. It is still good, but it is also

polluted. And we are to guard ourselves against that pollution because that pollution is part of the fallen world, a world in which we are only guests.

God is Coming for a Visit

I've run off at the mouth (keyboard) for long enough now, but I wanted to through this in because it pricks my interest. Calvin interprets God's visit to us not eschatologically, but in terms of conversion. He writes,

> "I know that some refer this to the last coming of Christ; but I take it otherwise, even that God employs the holy and honest life of his people, as a preparation, to bring back the wandering to the right way. For it is the beginning of our conversion, when God is pleased to look on us with a paternal eye; but when his face is turned away from us, we perish. Hence the day of visitation may justly be said to be the time when he invites us to himself."

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 2.13-16

(Wednesday, April 18, 2007)

1 Peter 2.13-16

[13] Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, [14] or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. [15] For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of the foolish. [16] Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.

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COMMENTARY:

The material in Calvin's comment on these verses can be divided easily into two themes, the former being dominant and the latter appearing toward the end: civil government and Christian freedom.

Civil Government

Calvin's teaching on civil government was the biggest hang-up that I had when I first began studying his theology a few years ago. But, as I have studied his understanding further, my worries have been largely set aside. This is not a wholesale endorsement, and there are ways to go about framing these questions in different ways than Calvin does, but no one should simply bypass Calvin's position on these matters.

The heart of Calvin's position is that "obedience is due to all who rule, because they have been raised to that honour not by chance, but by God's providence." Most people are generally fine

with this as far as it goes, but a question soon arises: "What about when the ruler is 'evil' to greater or lesser degrees?" This is where Calvin's position gets uncomfortable for most people (especially for Americans and our national pride in wanting to defend the rectitude of the political and military rebellion that established our independent existence). He affirms that "government established by God ought to be so highly valued by us, as to honour even tyrants when in power."

Aside from the argument from God's providence, Calvin offers one very practical reason for this affirmation, namely, that "some kind of government, however deformed and corrupt it may be, is still better and more beneficial than anarchy." For Calvin, the very existence of government is a restraint for sin precisely because it involves the imposition of order (even if a vastly deformed order) on what would otherwise be the self-serving chaos of sin.

This brings us to an interesting twist in Calvin's treatment of this passage. While the TNIV tells us to submit ourselves to "every human authority," Calvin translates this as submission to "every ordinance of man." This could be taken in two ways. First, it could refer to all laws made by human beings. This could become problematic if laws are made forbidding the proper worship of God. Calvin certainly does not want to say that we are to submit our freedom of conscience to laws made by human beings. Luckily, he does not have to go in that direction, because he has another way of interpreting this passage. Second, this phrase could refer to the "mode of living, well arranged and duly ordered…peculiar to men." That is, this phrase refers to the order established by God for the purpose of the flourishing of human society. This, I would argue, is at the heart of why Calvin prefers government to anarchy.

But, enough digression. What of Calvin's affirmation that we should obey even tyrannical governments? There are no outs for us in Calvin's comment on this passage, but there is one in his treatment in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. After Calvin goes through his discussion of the need to obey and honor even tyrants, he adds this vital paragraph (this is the second to last paragraph in Book 4, and thus in the entire *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.20.31):

> "I am speaking all the while of private individuals. For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings…I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance."

That is, lesser magistrates may and must stand up to more powerful magistrates, or, lesser nobility may and must stand up to the higher levels of nobility, or, one branch of government may and must stand up to another branch of government. What this boils down to is that, although we must obey even tyrants, we are also morally obligated to resist those same tyrants by any and all lawful means. We can't be sure, but I imagine that Calvin might (on a good day) include unlawful but non-violent means as well.

<u>Christian Freedom</u>

I have written about freedom in the past. Calvin takes it up at the end of him comments on this passage. His position is somewhat dialectic: "those are free who serve God", and "it is a free servitude, and a serving freedom." The freedom that comes with being a Christian is not a freedom to be arbitrarily self-seeking. Rather, it is freedom from sin and for obedience to God and love of the neighbor. This requires that we exercise moderation, an important theme in Calvin's treatment of this subject in the*Institutes of the Christian Religion* (3.19). As Calvin concludes in this section of his commentary:

> "[I]ndeed, our consciences become free; but this prevents us not to serve God, who requires us also to be subject to men."

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 2.17

(Wednesday, July 25, 2007)

1 Peter 2.17

[17] Show proper respect to everyone, love your fellow believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

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COMMENTARY:

Calvin has given me approximately one page worth of material to work with here. According to his interpretation, this verse is a summary of all that has gone before, and it is rather self-explanatory. The movement is from a general concern that should be had for all human persons, followed by a special concern for fellow believers, rooted in the fear of God, from which obedience to the government derives. Calvin adds that the emperor / king is specifically mentioned because it represents the most despised form of government, and that all other forms of government should be understood as included under this form.

If you are looking for one verse that encapsulates the Christian ethic, this is a good place to start. I highly recommend memorizing this verse, which isn't a very daunting challenge. But, I also recommend that you DO NOT memorize the TNIV version I have given above. Calvin's translation as rendered into English, which is very reminiscent of some of the older English renderings of this verse, is much more evocative, in my humble opinion. Here is my own translation, which has slightly modified Calvin's:

> "Respect all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Respect the king."

Feel free to substitute "fellowship" or "church" or something like that for "brotherhood" in the above (as the TNIV has done). The Greek in question is the expected and rather benign "adelphoteta", for those of you who care about these things.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 2.18-20

(Wednesday, August 01, 2007)

1 Peter 2.18-20

[18] Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. [19] For it is commendable if you bear up under the pain of unjust suffering because you are conscious of God. [20] But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

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COMMENTARY:

Calvin's penchant for brevity has turned into something of an obstacle for us in this series. The dearth of material that he offers to us leads, in turn, to a dearth of material that I can offer to you my readers. And yet, we will not turn aside.

Context

When undertaking Scriptural exegesis, there are two aspects of context to which one must give attention. First, there is the literary context, that is, one must consider the text that comes before and after the passage in question. There are varying sublevels here, beginning with the sentences prior or after, moving out to encompass whole chapters and books, further still to the Testament (Old or New) in question, and also to the entirety of the canon. At this point, consideration of context passes outside of the canon, and thus enters into its second aspect, namely, historical context. This includes such aspects as material, social and intellectual history. How much attention that an exegete can give to all thee varying levels of context is determined by skill, time, and goal. Why do I bring this up? In part because Calvin doesn't give me much to work with here so I need something to talk about, but also because Calvin gives us brief examples of both of these aspects. He tells us that these verses are "connected with what is gone before, as well as the other things which follow," and this helps us to see that we are concerned with "civil or social subjection," as opposed to ontological subjection (one assumes). Calvin also, in his discussion of the relation of slaves and servants to masters, take into consideration the condition of this relationship "at that time" in an attempt to understand precisely what is demanded by this passage.

Polemic

In the midst of his discussion, Calvin gives us a paragraph that is simply a gem. This kind of paragraph makes doing this kind of habitual reading in Calvin worthwhile (and imagine, you all get the benefit of my discipline in these matters!). What the TNIV gives us above in verse 18 as "those who are harsh" is translated by Calvin as "the forward", which he takes to mean masters who are not "equitable or humane". But, there is a variant (whether in the textual or in the

interpretive tradition is hard to ascertain) here that Calvin notices where "forward" has been changed to "wayward", which Calvin notes has been used by

> "the Sorbons, who commonly understand by wayward, the dissolute or dissipated, were it not that they seek by this absurd rendering to build up for us an article of faith, that we ought to obey the Pope and his horned wild beasts, however grievous and intolerable a tyranny they may exercise. This passage, then shews how boldly they trifle with the Word of God."

It is that last line, where Calvin attaches this variant linguistic rendering to trifling with the Word of God, that gets me. Classic!

Duty

Although it only pops up here and there, the center of Calvin's interpretation of these admonitions seems to be the idea of 'duty'. When speaking of the fear that should accompany submitting to masters, Calvin says that "fear arises from a right knowledge of duty" (and, thus, the TNIV rendering of "reverent fear" seems to hit the mark by Calvin's standards). A little later Calvin writes that "one performs his duty, not from a regard to men, but to God."

It seems to me, on the basis of my reading of Calvin (not just in this series but through the years) that 'duty' plays an important role in Calvin's thought. It ties in with his notion of vocation, of Christian freedom, and a host of other topics. For Calvin, duty is central to freedom, for true freedom comes only through submission to the order established by God – freedom comes through doing our duty, we might say. It seems to me that our contemporary situation gets this relation between freedom and duty hopelessly wrong. Things like 'duty' or 'responsibility' are often seen as things that impede our freedom, and things that therefore should be cast off. But this is destructive self-servitude, not true freedom. True freedom is always 'freedom for' and never simply 'freedom from'.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 2.21-23

(Wednesday, August 08, 2007)

1 Peter 2.21-23

[21] To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. [22] "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." {Isaiah 53.9} [23] When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

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COMMENTARY:

In the few pages of commentary connected to this passage we find something of the non-violent

Calvin. That Calvin could express sentiments like those we find here is an incredible thought for many people, especially if they have stumbled upon the defamatory literature on the web concerning Calvin and Servetus (most of which is riddled with historical inaccuracies, btw). But, we must remember to make an important distinction between what Christians are to willingly bear in patience for the sake of the gospel, what the civil government has responsibilities for, and what citizens of a Christian polis have recourse to. That is, should someone have been mistreated within Calvin's own Geneva, this person would have had numerous avenues of lawful redress. But, when persecution comes at the hands of a non-believer or outside the scope of lawful redress, we see that Calvin is not unable to speak of non-violence.

The preceding is how I would situate the material in this section of Calvin's commentary, and may just as easily be erroneous as correct. But, on to the text!

We are called by God for the purpose of patiently bearing wrongs, Calvin notes. Furthermore, Christ is our example in this. Here Calvin provides a really interesting paragraph concerning the imitation of Christ. What in Christ are we to imitate? His walking on water? His fasting in the wilderness for forty days? No. As Calvin puts it, "when he gave these evidences of his power, it was not his object that we should thus imitate him." Because of this, we have to exercise "a right judgment" in order to discern what in Christ we are to imitate. Of course, here Calvin thinks Peter to be clear that it is Christ's patience that we are to imitate. He ties it all up thusly: "Hence, that we may live with him, we must previously die with him."

But, even as we imitate Christ in these proper ways we must recognize an important distinction between Christ and ourselves, namely, that Christ was perfectly innocent and we are not. From this Calvin argues: "There is…no reason why any one of us should refuse to suffer after his example, since no one is so conscious of having acted rightly, as not to know that he is imperfect." In other words, we are not perfect and therefore deserve to suffer. Now, as much as we don't like the sound of this in our day and age, it does make a certain amount of sense. We tend to connect particular consequences to particular failings. Let us take the case of someone getting a speeding ticket (this will be a very imperfect analogy!). Imagine that you are cruising down the road at 55 mph in a 50 mph zone, and a police officer pulls you over and tickets you. This is certainly an unusual occurrence: police rarely pull people over for doing less than 8 mph over the speed limit! It seems egregious for you to be pulled over when you were driving carefully and in keeping with social convention (let's set aside the fact that convention does not equal legality). But, who among us has never in their lives driven at greater than 10 mph over the limit? If we have done that in the past, why should we rebel against the thought of being given a ticket, even for going only 1 mph over the limit? We deserve the ticket on the basis of our past behavior, but we think that once we have gotten away with something that it is no longer of consequence.

In a sense, this is and must be the case in terms of human law (statutes of limitation, etc). But, we are dealing with God. Remember Calvin's doctrine of providence. Though our suffering comes from the hands of other human beings, ultimately it comes from God's hands, against whom we know that we have sinned and by whom we deserve to be punished. Thus, Calvin (with Peter!) can admonish us to submit to suffering by human hands knowing that it is to God that we thereby submit.

There is one more factor that we must consider, namely, that we "have God as [our] defender." In the same way that our suffering comes ultimately from God, God will ultimately vindicate us where we have suffered unjustly. (Punishment from God is always right; suffering delivered by the hands of human beings is not necessarily right even when we recognize it as part of God's discipline of us – a very important point!). Thus, we must leave vengeance and retribution to God. But, not only this! For we again have Christ's example. "Christ did…refer his judgment to God, and yet did not demand vengeance to be taken on his enemies," and we are to do the same. Calvin hopes that we will be able to say: "how I wish them to be saved who seek to destroy me." For this "meekness was manifested by Christ; it is then the rule to be observed by us."

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 2.24-25
(Wednesday, August 15, 2007)

1 Peter 2.24-25

[24] "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." [25] For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

*NB: Quotes are from Isaiah 53

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COMMENTARY:

Calvin comments on these three extraordinary verses in the space of three pages, but in that time he touches on some central themes in Christian soteriology and even manages to quibble a bit with the Roman Catholics of his day, whom he here calls "the Sophists in their schools." From these verses Calvin extracts three primary points. First, "Christ by his death has given us an example of patience." Calvin seems to be drawing upon the preceding verses for this meaning. Second, "by his death he restored us to life" for which reason "we ought cheerfully to follow his example." Third, we find an explanation of the reason why Christ died, namely, that we "being dead to sins, ought to live to righteousness."

The phrase that Calvin translates as "Who his own self bare our sins" becomes important, and here Calvin addresses the atonement. It should be noted that Calvin speaks of imputation and substitution, but – and here we must trust to the editor a bit more than I would like – Calvin consistently decides in favor of **expiation** over **propitiation**. As some of you may know, the former reforms more properly to the removal of sin while the latter refers more properly to the satisfaction of some controlling consideration – God's wrath in the case of the atonement. Thus, on the basis of this text, it would be incorrect to call Calvin a supporter of the**penal substitutionary** understanding of the atonement. However, Calvin goes not to speak in more penal substitutionary terms: "we are reconciled to God on this condition, because Christ made himself before his tribunal…as one guilty for us, that he might suffer the punishment due to us"

and, later, "not only guilt was imputed to him, but…he also suffered its punishment…" Of course, because Calvin is such a nimble thinker, these moves resolve in this very sentence back to the previous position: ""not only guilt was imputed to him, but…he also suffered its punishment, that he might thus be an expiatory victim."

It should be noted in passing that one of the great achievements of Karl Barth mature doctrine of the atonement (*Church Dogmatics* IV/1) is that he maintains both concepts (expiation and propitiation) but orders them such that propitiation exists only secondarily and in service of expiation, that is, God's wrath serves God's love.

Now, Calvin manages to mix it up a bit with the Roman Catholics of his day on the question of whether Christ took care of our deserved guilt and punishment, or just the guilt while the punishment bit is up to us to take care of. It is easy to see from some of the quotes above that Calvin thinks that Christ took care of both. What sort of import these distinctions have for Protestant / Roman Catholic dialogues these days is beyond my ken, but I would love to be enlightened.

Of course, Calvin is always concerned with ethics. The point of our reconciliation to God is that we might live holy lives. Indeed, that is the point of our dieing to sin. Those of you who know some Reformed theology will recognize the theme of **mortification**, and Calvin uses that word. This mortification to sin is a *benefitia Christi*: "there is power in Christ's death to mortify our flesh," indeed, "the death of Christ is efficacious for the expiation of sins, and also for the mortification of the flesh." It is this increasing mortification that lies at the heart of the Reformed notion of sanctification. But, it must be noted that this increasing mortification is not something that we accomplish, but is the fruit of Christ's work on our behalf and in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This marks the end of 1 Peter chapter 2. We have now covered 95 pages of Calvin's commentaries. That seems like quite a milestone to me! We have about another 60 pages to go in 1 Peter. Feel free to e-mail me with suggestions for which of Calvin's commentaries to tackle next!

[Note: in the comments thread, Jason Goroncy suggested I tackle a minor prophet and I replied by saying that I had been thinking of doing Micah or Malachi.]

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 3.1-4

(Wednesday, August 22, 2007)

1 Peter 3.1-4

[1] Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, [2] when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. [3] Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. [4] Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet

spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

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COMMENTARY:

I'm afraid that this is one of the times when I feel the need to both defend Calvin and make excuses for him. As much as I would love to be able to say that Calvin was a feminist a few hundred years before anyone else really was, I cannot. Of course, this is the same kind of thing that we must remember with reference to the writers of the biblical text. We must judge them in light of their cultural situation, and not in light of our own. With reference once again to Calvin, it should be noted that despite what he may say in certain texts such as this, he really had a rather robust view of the male-female relationship in marriage, a relationship that he saw as full of reciprocity, tenderness, and love (in all the best senses of the word). If you want to get a taste of that, I recommend Calvin's commentary on Genesis.

This material naturally divides into two portions: first, the material having to do with influencing husbands; and, second, the bit having to do with jewelry, hairstyles and how women dress. What Calvin fixates on in the first section is the notion that wives might win their husbands to Christ without words. He points out that what Peter means is that wives can do much "to prepare their husbands, without speaking to them on religion, to embrace the faith of Christ."

The second section is, admittedly, the one with the embarrassing quotes. Here is one: "wives are to adorn themselves sparingly and modestly: *for we know that they are in this respect much more curious and ambitious than they ought to be*" (italics are mine). But, does this mean that absolutely no adornment and, what is more, absolutely no clothing is permitted to the Christian? Calvin's intense commitment to the notion of moderation means that one need not worry about him being too extreme on these issues (cf. Calvin's *Institutes* 3.19 for his treatment of Christian freedom). Calvin breaks down these questions into their various parts, and identifies the focus of the passage on the evil of vanity (not without an embarrassing phrase or two): "Peter did not intend to condemn every sort of ornament, but the evil of vanity, to which women are subject."

So, what of the clothing question? "Two things are to be regarded in clothing, usefulness and decency; and what decency requires is moderation and modesty." This makes a lot of sense. When wearing clothes, we need to think about wearing things that make sense for what we will be doing in those clothes, and we need to be decent with reference to our cultural standards. And, with reference to decency, we need to be modest (again, I would say – and I think that I could make the case for continuity with Calvin – that this refers to cultural standards) and moderate. The talk of moderation here is the bit that directly has to do with vanity. One should not dress in order to feed one's ego. Of course, we would argue (and I suspect that Calvin would also) that this refers to both men and women; it is a shame that Calvin thinks it applies especially to women in any essential (and not a culturally conditioned) sense.

NB: For anyone who is looking for a good exegetical resource on women in the New Testament, I recommend Craig Keener's *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the*

Letters of Paul. It only covers Paul, but it is excellent and the patterns established in the Pauline letters (household codes, etc) carry over into the sort of passage that we have here in 1 Peter.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 3.5-7
(Wednesday, October 24, 2007)

1 Peter 3.5-7

[5] For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their husbands, [6] like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. [7] Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

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COMMENTARY:

Unfortunately, this section (which Calvin treats as two different entries, and which I have combined) contains more of the same sort of notions about women as we saw in the previous section. Having acknowledged that Calvin was a man of his age when it comes to these matters, I do not want to dwell on them further here.

However, I mentioned previously that Calvin did in fact have some rather salutary views on the marriage relationship, and these views come out to some extent in this section. When he arrives at verse 7, Calvin writes: "dominion over their wives is not given them, except on this condition, that they exercise authority prudently." I was surprised that he used the term "condition" rather than speaking in terms of purpose because condition implies a state of affairs that must be fulfilled in order for the dominion to be in effect. If this condition is not fulfilled, is the dominion in effect? In any case, the Genevan Consistory (the corporate organ for church discipline) often arbitrated in marital disputes, and while wives were held accountable in their submission, husbands were also held accountable to this condition of prudence. Moreover, Calvin goes on to affirm that part of this prudence means that "husbands honor their wives" in order to protect the "friendship" and "love" of the marriage relationship.

Of course, the whole patriarchy thing is undermined by the end of verse 7 where women are spoken of as "heirs with you of the gracious gift of life." Calvin certainly comments on this material: "For since the Lord is pleased to bestow in common on husbands and wives the same graces, he invites them to seek an equality in them" and "[the hope of salvation] is offered by the Lord to [women] no less than to their husbands." It is a shame that Calvin didn't better understand that if men and women are to be equal in receiving salvation, perhaps they are to be equal in other ways as well.

Here is an interesting aside. When dealing with the bit at the end of verse 7 on prayer, Calvin

mentions that some of his contemporaries link this with the notion in 1 Corinthians 7.5 about a couple abstaining from sex for a time in order to devote themselves to prayer. He doesn't think that these two are linked, but the funny part is how he sets things up: "Some give this explanation, that an intercourse with the wife ought to be sparing and temperate, lest too much indulgence in this respect should prevent attention to prayer…" By going on and refuting this position, Calvin *could* be read as saying something like this: "Sparing and temperate intercourse? Forget that!"

One last comment on the bit in verse 6 about Sarah obeying Abraham and calling him 'lord'. Calvin points out that "God, indeed, does not regard such titles." In any case, this bit of the biblical text seems like revisionist history to me. The way I remember it, Abraham did as much obeying of Sarah (think Hagar) as Sarah did of Abraham, and when Sarah did obey Abraham it usually got her hit on by other men.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 3.8-9

(Wednesday, January 09, 2008)

1 Peter 3.8-9

[8] Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. [9] Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

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COMMENTARY:

This section is another fine exhibition of Calvin's love of brevity: these two verses are given less than two pages of comment. Calvin understands these verses, coming as they do after a long list of advice and admonishments to various types of people, to be "general precepts which indiscriminately belong to all." Furthermore, these things are "especially necessary to foster friendship and love," something that was always at the forefront of Calvin's mind even though many people have a rather different stereotype of him.

What Calvin has to say about being like-minded is interesting in that he affirms that "friends are at liberty to think different" but also says that "to do so is a cloud which obscures love; yea, from this seed easily arises hatred." I don't know quite what to do with this except to chalk it up to dialectic – we are to seek a balance between utter freedom of thought and utter conformity of thought.

Another point that Calvin makes strongly has to do with being humble. He calls humility

> "the chief bond to preserve friendship, when every one thinks modestly and humbly of himself; as there is nothing on the other hand which produces more discords than when

> we think too highly of ourselves. Wisely then does Peter bids us to be humble-minded…lest pride and haughtiness should lead us to despise our neighbors."

Finally, Calvin sums these verses up nicely when he writes

> "Peter teaches us in general, that evils are to be overcome with acts of kindness. This is indeed very hard, but we ought to imitate in this case our heavenly Father, who makes his sun to rise on the unworthy."

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 3.10-15

(Monday, July 21, 2008)

1 Peter 3.10-15

[10] For, "Whoever among you would love life and see good days must keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech. [11] Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. [12] For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."* [13] Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? [14] But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened."* [15] But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.

* Psalm 34.12-16 and Isaiah 8.12, respectively.

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COMMENTARY:

Calvin gave me much more to work with in this section with reference to sheer volume of words, but for some reason I've come up a bit dry. One interesting point is that Calvin quotes from Plato's *Republic* in the course of his exposition, something you don't see too much of anymore. Below are short quotations from Calvin's reflections on peace and violence, and suffering for the sake of righteousness.

<u>Peace</u>

Seek peace and pursue it. - "It is not enough to embrace it when offered to us, but it ought to be followed when it seems to flee from us. It also often happens, that when we seek it as much as we can, others will not grant it to us. On account of these difficulties and hindrances, he bids us to seek and pursue it."

<u>Violence</u>

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. – "The meaning is, that the faithful will do more towards obtaining a quiet life by kindness, than by violence…"

Suffering for what is right

"…but that when they neglect nothing to secure peace, were they to suffer, they are still blessed because they suffer for the sake of righteousness…To suffer *for righteousness*, means not only to submit to some loss or disadvantage in defending a good cause, but also to suffer unjustly, when any one is innocently in fear among men on account of the fear of God."

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 3.15-18

(Wednesday, July 30, 2008)

1 Peter 3.15-18

[15] …Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, [16] keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. [17] It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. [18] For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

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COMMENTARY: To begin, I should note that I have (again) combined two of Calvin's sections into one for the sake of having more material to work with. Calvin's avowed pursuit of exegetical brevity is often my cross to bear, although it makes reading his commentaries a rather pleasant exercise – and one which I commend to all of you who are following this series.

Calvin begins by noticing that "Peter does not expressly bid us assert and proclaim what has been given us by the Lord everywhere, and always and among all indiscriminately, for the Lord gives his people the spirit of discretion, so that they may know when and how far and to whom it is expedient to speak" (108). The point, Calvin tells us, is that we ought to be ready to confess and defend our faith from detractors, not that we need to be out talking about our faith all the time. Such a interpretation is in keeping with both Calvin's predestinarianism – it is only expedient to talk about Christ to the elect but not yet efficiently called, as it were – and with his love of moderation – radicalism is not something that he looks kindly upon. Furthermore, we see here also Calvin's conception of vocation and offices: "Peter here does not command us to be prepared to solve any question that may be mooted; for it is not the duty of all to speak on every subject" (ibid). Some things are better left to pastors, theologians, biblical scholars, politicians, etc.

What Calvin thinks Peter seeks to communicate in this passage is that every be0liever – the average person in the pew – "should make it evident to unbelievers that [he or she] truly worshipped God, and had a holy and good religion" (ibid). This was important in the context of the epistle's writing, Calvin notes, which saw Christianity as sacrilegious. Against these claims, Peter wants for his readers "to make it evident to the world that they were far off from every impiety, and did not corrupt true religion" (109).

But, Calvin notes that it is important to join to this Peter's remarks about having a good conscious. The force of this phrase is that verbal defense of the Christian faith is undermined by a life that lacks virtue. As Calvin puts its, "What we say without a corresponding life has but little weight," or, "But the defence of the tongue will avail but little, except the life corresponds with it" (110). Furthermore, it is this corresponding life of virtue that causes the enemies of Christianity to be ashamed of their false accusations. It is here that Calvin gives us one of his rephrasings of the Scriptural text in light of his interpretation: "[It is] as though he had said, 'If your adversaries have nothing to allege against you, except that you follow Christ, they will at length be ashamed of their malicious wickedness, or at least, you innocence will be sufficient to confute them.'" (ibid).

Coming again to the question of suffering, Calvin notes the truth of the notion that it is better to suffer for good than to suffer for evil. The notion operative here is that if one suffers for good, one can at least be comforted by one's goodness. If on suffers because of evil, on the other hand, not only does one suffers but one also knows that it is one's own evil that brought this suffering. Now, Calvin notes that such a sentiment "occurs everywhere in profane authors" (111). Calvin knew his Stoics, so one suspect that he is thinking of them. Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*also comes to mind in this regard. But, there is something in this passage not found in the 'profane authors,' namely, reference to the will of God. The fruit of this is that, unlike the profane, "the faithful have always this comfort in their miseries, that they know that they have God as their witness, and that they also know that they are led by him to the contest, in order that they may under his protection give a proof of their faith" (ibid).

The concluding material on Christ and his acquisition of salvation is fascinating. Indeed, this verse holds the seed to a very robust soteriology, and I am happy to have been made more aware of its presence in the course of the current study. But, Calvin doesn't do much with it, basically saying simply that Christ's example encourages us in our trials. This is true, and this is how this verse is functioning in context, but there is so much more here.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 3.19-22

(Wednesday, August 06, 2008)

1 Peter 3.19-22

[19] In that state he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits – [20] to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, [21] and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, [22] who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

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COMMENTARY: This is quite an interesting biblical passage, and Calvin's discussion is correspondingly interesting. I always enjoy watching Calvin wrestle with a text, and he does so with this one – especially verse 19.

He begins by setting aside what he takes to be misinterpretations of this verse: some have taken it to refer to Christ's descent into hell, but that can't be true because it does not refer to Christ's soul preaching to other souls; some have taken it to mean that Christ preaches to those imprisoned by sin through the apostles, but that doesn't make sense because the preaching is directed to spirits and it doesn't make sense to switch from talking about the apostles to talking about Noah; some think that those who died before Christ were freed from their sins after their death, but this is wrong because Scripture says that salvation is by faith so that "there is no hope left for those who continue to death unbelieving" (113).

So then, Calvin, what does this verse mean? Well, replies Calvin, the word translated prison - fulakh - can actually be translated as 'watchtower,' such that "godly souls were watching in hope of the salvation promised them, as though they saw it afar off" (114). But, even if one insists on sticking with the 'prison' translation, that make sense too because those who lived before Christ were prisoners to the Law. So, to conclude, in verse 19 "Peter speaks generally, that the manifestation of Christ's grace was made to the godly spirits, and that they were thus endued with the vital power of the Spirit" (ibid).

But, there is a wrinkle here in that verse 20 goes on to speak of those who disobedient when we would expect a discussion of the faithful. But this does not have to mean that in verse 19 Christ appeared to those who were formerly unbelievers if one recognizes "that then the true servants of God were mixed together with the unbelieving, and were almost hidden on account of their number" (115). But Calvin, the exegetically skilled interpreter might say, if that was the intended reading then Peter should have used a genitive absolute. (NB: I am too lazy to look this up and see what the new critical editions do with this passage in terms of case, so I'll still with representing Calvin.) How do you account for that? Well, replies Calvin, "I allow that the Greek construction is at variance with this meaning…But as it was not unusual with the Apostles to put one case instead of another…and no other suitable meaning can be elicited, I have no hesitation in giving this explanation" (ibid).

Now, does anyone else find Calvin's 'interpretative method' here somewhat amusing? He basically reads against the most prima facie meaning of this text, including a few points at which he sets aside the precise case or the more common meaning of a term, because he isn't interested in the theological implications that seem to arise from this passage. This isn't to say that Calvin throws out this passage willy-nilly. Instead, he has to wrestle with it to extract an interpretation that both makes some sense of what is textually here and that fits with his larger theological picture – or, we might choose to spin it, that makes sense in light of the whole canonical context. I personally find this *modus operandi* attractive.

There is much more in this section worth checking out, but to do so here would make this post obscenely long. Instead, I leave you with a couple summary quotations:

> As Noah, then, obtained life through death, when in the ark, he was enclosed not otherwise than as it were in the grave, and when the whole world perished, he was preserved together with his small family; so at this day, the death which is set forth in baptism, is to us an entrance into life, nor can salvation be hoped for, except we be separated from the world. (117)
>
> [Peter] recommends to us the ascention of Christ until heaven, lest our eyes should seek him in the world; and this belongs especially to faith…And what his sitting at the right hand of the Father means, we have elsewhere explained, that is, that Christ exercises supreme power everywhere as God's representative. (119)

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 4.1-5

(Wednesday, August 13, 2008)

1 Peter 4.1-5

[1] Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because those who have suffered in their bodies are done with sin. [2] As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. [3] For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. [4] They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. [5] But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

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COMMENTARY: We now commence with the fourth chapter of Peter's first epistle. There are a few interesting and instructive points in these few verses.

First, Calvin addresses the role of Christ in the Christian's life. Calvin is careful to ensure that his readers do not conclude that Christ's only role is to serve as an example to them of how to life. Christ is certainly an example, but he is also more than an example. He is the source of the Spirit, who carries out sanctification in our own lives in an 'effectual' manner. Here is Calvin:

> The Scripture recommends to us a twofold likeness to the death of Christ, that we are to be conformed to him in reproaches and troubles, and also that the old man being dead and extinct in us, we are to be renewed to a spiritual life…Yet Christ is not simply to be viewed as our example, when we speak of the mortification of the flesh; but it is by his Spirit that we are really made conformable to his death, so that it becomes effectual to the crucifying of our flesh. (120)

Furthermore, Calvin explains that our mortification need not correspond exactly to Christ's mortification – thank goodness! In fact, as Calvin points out, a comparison does not correspond in every part. As Gregory of Nyssa once argued (and I am interposing this; Calvin doesn't cite it), if there was no distinction then there would not be similarity but identity!

Next, Calvin notes that the term 'flesh' shows up in both verse 1 and verse 2, and is used in two different ways. When it is first used, it is used with reference to Christ and refers to his physical body. When it is next used, it is used with reference to human sinfulness in general. The second definition doesn't apply to Christ, for Christ lived without sin, and the first definition doesn't apply to us, because this passage is about sinning and not persecution.

Finally, on first read, it might look like we Gentiles are getting the raw deal in this passage, charged with all manner of immorality. But, Calvin is quick to note, that Peter doesn't think every Gentile is guilty of each of the listed peccadilloes, but that the listed things are intended to represent all manner of sinfulness. The conclusion being that Gentiles as a group are guilty of all manner of sinfulness, and that "There is indeed no one who has not within him the seed of all vices, but all do not germinate and grow up in every individual. Yet the contagion is so spread and diffused through the whole human race, that the show community appears infected with innumerable evils, and that no member is free or pure from the common corruption" (124). Now, I find this account of total depravity interesting because it sounds much more patristic than do many later proponents of total depravity. Here, sin is a disease of the soul, not the absolute absence of life. It is like a parasite that requires a living host, even while destroying that host from the inside out. This depravity is total in that it touches every person, but not total in that the imagery employed does not imply that nothing but sin exists in the human condition.

Finally, it is fun to note that this is the passage where the creedal "the living and dead" ("the quick and the dead," for those – like me – who enjoy the older English) line comes from.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 4.6-11

(Wednesday, August 20, 2008)

1 Peter 4.6-11

[6] For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit. [7] The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. [8] Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. [9] Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. [10] Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. [11] If you speak, you should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If you serve, you should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

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COMMENTARY: In keeping with his previous interpretation of 3.19, Calvin takes 'the dead' in verse six to be those who had received the gospel prior to death. The judgment according to human standards he takes to be death itself, even though from God's perspective they now live with God in the Spirit. Calvin puts it thusly himself: "So that the meaning is, that though

according to the estimation of the world the dead suffer destruction in their flesh, and are deemed condemned as to the outward man, yet they cease not to live with God, and that in their spirit, because Christ quickens them by his Spirit" (126). Believers thus have consolation that our salvation is not negated by death, and that death "does not hinder Christ from being always our defender" (ibid).

Verse 7 is intended to rouse Peter's readers from apathy, reminding us that "we ought not to sit still in the world, from which we must soon remove" (127). One certainly could not charge Calvin with having a 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die' mentality that forgets to labor for the betterment of the hear and now. His is a strenuous ethic of engagement with the world and its problems. For instance, it was largely through his efforts that Geneva installed regulations requiring that porches and balconies on high levels of houses have railings to prevent children from falling off. Also, Calvin was instrumental in establishing schooling and heath-care systems in Geneva to care for the citizens.

Geneva in Calvin's time was also quite liberal in its welcome of foreign refugees from all across Europe, and this makes even more pointed what Calvin has to say in this passage about hospitality. He calls such behavior "one of the duties of love" (130), and a mutual undertaking so that no one is taken advantage of and so that everyone is cared for. Stewardship is also important here, for Calvin reminds us that "we do not give our own, but only dispense what God has committed to us" (ibid).

The office of teaching and ministry in general represent, for Calvin, case studies in the mutual sharing of gifts that should characterize the church. He sums thing up with on of his paraphrases:

> "[It is] as though [Peter] had said, 'Whatever part of the burden thou bearest in the Church, know that thou canst do nothing but what has been given thee by the Lord, and that thou art nothing else but an instrument of God: take heed, then, not to abuse the grace of God by exalting thyself; take heed, then, not to abuse the grace of God by exalting thyself; take heed not to suppress the power of God, which puts forth and manifests itself in the ministry for the salvation of the brethren [and sistren]."

It is unfortunate that Calvin does not do more with Peter's language about those who teach speaking the very words of God. Calvin is more interested in reading this as an admonition to teach nothing but what is found in Scripture, which is certainly an important point. He does, however, bring the notion of human ministry as an 'instrument of God' into play in the above quote, which moves in this direction.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 4.12-17

(Tuesday, August 26, 2008)

1 Peter 4.12-17

[12] Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. [13] But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in

the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. [14] If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. [15] If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or their or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. [16] However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. [17] For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household…

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COMMENTARY: I want to make two brief points about this section, one directly related to Calvin's commentary and one tangentially related.

First, the tangentially related point. Look at verse 14. Does it remind you of anything? When Calvin treats this verse, he identifies it as in keeping with "what Christ says" about those "who are reproached for the sake of the Gospel" (135). Now, the editors (I believe) have inserted a biblical reference here to help readers catch the allusion. They point us to Mark 8.35: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." In all fairness, this reference makes sense. The gospel is mentioned both here in 1 Peter and in the Mark passage as the reason for adversity, for instance. But, for my money, this is not the correct allusion. The Vulgate version of this passage, which is set parallel with an English translation (perhaps from Calvin's own translation into French?) at the beginning of each commentary section, uses the term *beati* for what is given to us about as "blessed" and what is given in the parallel English version as "happy." Both the Latin term and the translation "blessed" give us a tip off with reference to what I think is the correct biblical allusion. For my money, Calvin is clearly pointing us to Mathew 5.11-2: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven." The clincher here is linguistic: the Greek term for blessed in each case is *makarioi*.

Aside from the academic interest in figuring out precisely which passage Calvin is trying to allude to here, verse 14 is significant. How often do we see reference to the Gospels in the Epistles?

Second, the directly related point. Throughout this section Calvin is working toward a distinction between suffering that occurs because of our Christian commitment, and suffering that comes as a part of life and that God uses to test us and consequently strengthen our faith. Furthermore, these are the only sorts of suffering that Calvin with entertain. For instance, we do not suffer because of our sins, since they have been forgiven – instead we are granted admission into "so honourable a warfare as to undergo for the testimony of his Gospel" various sufferings (137). Now, I don't think Calvin means that when Christians sin they do not reap real-world consequences. Rather, when these consequences occur they are not God's wrath but God's fatherly discipline. Back to the main point, however: this distinction between suffering for Christ's sake and suffering to test and strengthen our faith is not one that Calvin makes cleanly but it is one that (I think) lies close at hand in the background here. Overlaps occur, of course: suffering for Christ's sake can certainly be a test and strengthening of our faith. But the fundamental distinction is, I think, both clear and helpful.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 4.17-19
(Tuesday, September 02, 2008)

1 Peter 4.17-19

[17] …and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? [18] And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"* [19] So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

*Proverbs 11.31 (see Septuagint)

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COMMENTARY: In the comments to the last installment of this series, the question was raised as to whether Calvin supports temporal happiness for Christians as opposed to exclusively eternal happiness. Calvin is dancing around this issue throughout the two and a half pages that make up his comments on these few verses.

At first it looks like he will land on the eternal side. The faithful see that the wicked prosper and are distraught by this because "present happiness is what all desire" (140). But this ought not ultimately vex the faithful because God is the judge of the world and the wicked will get their comeuppance: "The design of what [Peter] says…is to shew that the children of God should not faint under the bitterness of present evils, but that they ought, on the contrary, calmly to bear their afflictions for a short time, as the issue will be salvation, while the ungodly will have to exchange a fading and fleeting prosperity for eternal perdition" (ibid).

Now, that long quote sounds like a textbook statement of the eternal happiness position – the point is salvation in the hereafter to don't worry about the crap you go through now. But, it also contains the seed of a more nuanced position that takes temporal happiness seriously. Notice that the language has shifted: Calvin says first that everyone wants to be happy, but in the end here he describes the temporal experience of the wicked as 'fading and fleeting prosperity.' Perhaps happiness properly conceived is different than what the wicked experience. This notion is brought home toward the end of the section's comments: "[Peter] draws this conclusion, that persecutions ought to be submissively endured, for the condition of the godly in them is much happier than that of the unbelieving, who enjoy prosperity to their utmost wish" (141).

What we have here in Calvin is the resting of the term 'happiness' away from the mere enjoyment of temporal pleasures in favor of a judgment upon the condition of one's life when considered sub specie aeternitas. We might still wish that Calvin had included some analysis whereby temporal goods are seen to further true happiness, or at least to establish conditions conducive to it, but such a position is seldom to be found in the tradition.

Now, to step back a moment, we have reached the conclusion of chapter 4. One chapter remains. We have traveled with Calvin through 142 pages of his commentary, and 13 pages remain. I am

not convinced that many people keep up with this series (since a death of comments suggests otherwise), I am open to suggestions as to which biblical book I next tackle Calvin's commentary concerning. For my own part, I'm thinking Malachi.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 5.1-4
(Tuesday, September 09, 2008)

1 Peter 5.1-4

[1] To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: [2] Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; [3] not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. [4] And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

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COMMENTARY: As we begin this fifth and final chapter, we are confronted with some instruction regarding the proper execution of ecclesial polity. Before getting to the actual commentary, Calvin opens with a quick schematic to cover what is going on in these verse, and it is worth quoting in full for no other reason than to make it available for those engaged in ministry (and myself, though concerned only with the ministry of theological endeavor):

> "In exhorting pastors to their duty, [Peter] points out especially three vices which are found to prevail much, even sloth, desire of gain, and lust for power. In opposition to the first vice he sets alacrity or a willing attention; to the second, liberality; to the third, moderation and meekness, by which they are to keep themselves in their own rank or station" (142).

For the sake of making some comment about this quote, I have to wonder why Calvin didn't simply call the second vice "greed," and the third "vainglory" or "pride." This would more nearly approximate the traditional '7 Deadly Sins' categorization. Indeed, Calvin's remedies here match up well with those 7 virtues meant to counteract the 7 sins.

After giving us this schema, Calvin moves right into a point that I think could stand to be made forcefully in today's context: "pastors ought not to exercise care over the flock of the Lord, as far only as they are constrained; for they who seek to do no more than what constraint compels them, do their work formally and negligently" (ibid). In the Reformed tradition, the term 'pastor' encompasses not only professional ministers but also elders – as Calvin notes with reference to verse 1: "By [the term 'elders' Peter] designates pastors and all those who are appointed for the government of the Church" (143). I don't know about the experience of others, but I have seen many lay leaders in churches who serve simply because the bylaws stipulate that somebody has to, and who exhibit far too little devotion to their calling. This may not be readily apparent, nor may it represent the self-understanding of those in question, but it is always a danger lurking

around the bend. Peter helpfully points it out, and Calvin highlights it.

Now, also with reference to verse 1, Calvin points out that Peter calls himself an elder, establishing a collegial bond as the basis of authority by which to admonish his readers. "But," Calvin says with one eye glancing toward Rome,

> "if he had the right of primacy he would have claimed it; and this would have been most suitable on the present occasion. But though he was an Apostle, he yet knew that authority was by no means delegated to him over his colleagues, but that on the contrary he was joined with the rest in the participation of the same office" (143-4).

With his eye similarly towards Rome, Calvin a little later affirms that the reference in verse 2 to "watching over" (in the TNIV above) or "taking oversight" (in Calvin's text) is the establishment "the office and title of the episcopate" (145; the Greek term in question is episkopountes). And yet, he draws from the present context and alludes vaguely to other biblical passages, "bishop and presbyter are synonymous" (ibid).

Sticking with verse 2, those who exercise care over the church are told to "Be shepherds of God's flock," according to the above TNIV. This is a correct render of the Greek verb here – poimaino, which has as its sense to do that which a shepherd does. Clearly, one of the things that a shepherd does is to feed the animals under his care, and that is how Calvin takes this verb – "Feed the flock of God…" It seems that this interpretation pre-dates Calvin since he is quick to point out that the feeding in question has nothing to do with a sacrificial mass. Rather, "the flock of Christ cannot be fed except with pure doctrine, which is alone our spiritual food" (144) – for those who have ears to hear, John 6 – oft taken as support for transubstantiation – comes to mind, and I can only assume that Calvin is purposefully alluding to it here.

Finally, I will conclude as Peter does – with Christ – and with Calvin's discussion of the matter:

> "It ought also to be observed, that [Peter] calls Christ the chief Pastor; for we are to rule the Church under him and in his name, in no other way but that he should be still really the Pastor. So the word chief here does not only mean the principal, but him whose power all others ought to submit to, as they do not represent him except according to his command and authority" (146-7).

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 5.5-7

(Tuesday, November 04, 2008)

1 Peter 5.5-7

[5] In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourself to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble and oppressed." [6] Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. [7] Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

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COMMENTARY: The three pages of Calvin's commentary on these verses are quite fascinating, at least to me, and I will here try to lift up the threat that I see running through it and trying to identify why it intrigues me as best I can.

Calvin begins by commenting on the exhortation that the 'younger' are to obey the 'elder,' and he argues that this exhortation is made with reference to physical age. Those who have accumulated fewer years are to submit to those who have accumulated more. There is certainly a common-sense plausibility to this reading, but I wonder if it might not be proper to read this more directly in light of the preceding discussion of ecclesial polity. Certainly the polity in question envisages the office of eldership as held by those who are physically elder, in some respect and at least as a general rule. Furthermore, if we really wanted to push things, couldn't we understand this admonition in terms of spiritual age?

The reason that Calvin reads this as he does, I think, is because he fails to think about these few verses in ecclesiological terms. Rather, his imagination goes to civil polity. Submission is necessary "for if there be no subjection, government is overturned. When they have no authority who ought by right or order of nature to rule, all will immediately because insolently wanton" (147). Calvin's elevation of physical maturity is coupled to his understanding of what is necessary for a stable society. This civil focus stays with Calvin throughout this section. Mutual submission is necessary, for instance, because "all ranks of society have to defend the whole body" (ibid).

Now, Calvin makes two interesting and related statements. First, he admits that "it was formerly very truly said, that every one has within him the soul of a king. Until, then, the high spirits, with which the nature of men swells, are subdued, no man will give way to another; but, on the contrary, each one, despising others, will claim all things for himself" (148). Second, we find this: "all those who recumb not on God's providence must necessarily be in constant turmoil and violently assail others" (149). Do these statements bring anything to mind? For me, they scream "Nietzsche!" I have long been convinced that, if Christianity is not true, then one is generally left with something like Nietzsche as an alternative. Calvin seems to agree with me; at the very least, he thinks that Christianity is necessary for the stability of civil society. Otherwise, all people will act as a king unto themselves: "Thou art one who hast unlearned to obey: now shalt thou command!…This is thy most unpardonable obstinacy: thou has the power, and thou wilt not rule" (Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, para. 44).

What we see here in this passage of commentary is, I think, supporting evidence for the picture of Calvin drawn by William Bouwsma. His thesis is that Calvin is torn between two competing impulses: an impulse toward order and an impulse toward freedom. These impulses are driven by competing fears: fear of anarchy (whether of society of or the mind), and fear of being smothered by overly rigid and comprehensive strictures. This internal conflict helps us to understand a very interesting image that Calvin here paints of God: "We are to imagine that God has two hands; the one, which like a hammer beats down and breaks in pieces those who raise up themselves; and the other, which raises up the humble who willingly let down themselves, and is like a firm prop to sustain them" (148). In other words, those who seek to upset civil order are opposed, and those

who do not so assert themselves will be sustained against that which may try to oppress them.

Finally, as an unrelated side note aimed at correcting those who think that Calvin's appeal to God's providence in the face of suffering is pastoral nonsense, he has this to say about verse 7: "we are not…bidden to cast all our cares on God, as though God wished us to have strong hearts, and to be void of all feeling; but lest fear or anxiety should drive us to impatience" (149).

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 5.8-11
(Tuesday, November 18, 2008)

1 Peter 5.8-11

[8] Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. [9] Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your fellow believers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. [10] And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. [11] To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

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COMMENTARY: There are a few interesting tidbits in this section. First, Calvin understands the admonition of verse 8 as intended to keep Christians from letting down their guard, or from indulging some of their lesser vices due to the apparent absence of spiritual trouble. Have the breathing space to face these temptations is certainly a welcome thing, but – as Calvin says – "we too often turn peace into sloth" (150).

Here is one of Calvin's famous 'as though he had said' bits: "[Peter] compares the devil to a lion, as though he had said, that he is a savage wild beast. He says that he goes round to devour, in order to rouse us to wariness. He calls him the adversary of the godly, that they might know that they worship God and profess faith in Christ on this condition, that they are to have continual war with the devil, for he does not spare the members who fights with the head" (150). This last phrase caught my attention because it reminds me of boxing, which comes up from time to time here at DET. The devil, like a good boxer, doesn't just throw punches at his opponent's head – Christ – but also at his body – the church. While the strategic goal is to take out the head – a knockout – tactics often dictate doing damage to the body.

This quote does raise a more serious question, however, because Calvin seems to introduce a condition to salvation. Those who confess Christ do so on the condition of waging war with the devil. Now, I don't have the Latin on hand, but it is clear even from this short bit of commentary that Calvin doesn't understand this 'condition' as a precondition for salvation: "all respect to our worthiness and merit is excluded; for that God, by the preaching of the gospel, invites us to himself, it is altogether gratuitous; and it is still a greater grace that he efficaciously touches our hearts so as to lead us to obey his voice" (152).

We now know that the conditional cannot be stated thusly: 'if one wages war on the devil, then one is saved.' Of course, this is not how Calvin phrases things either. In keeping with his own construction, we ought to stated it thusly: 'if one is saved, then one wages war on the devil.' This is the sort of activity that arises out of one's union with Christ.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: 1 Peter 5.12-14

(Tuesday, December 02, 2008)

1 Peter 5.12-14

[12] With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. [13] She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. [14] Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

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COMMENTARY: And so we come to the end of 1 Peter. There is very little to say here about concluding salutations and benedictions, and Calvin deals with it in a page and a half of what is mostly repeating and elaborating what Peter himself says.

There is one interesting point, however. A feminine nominative appears in verse 13, denoted simply as 'she' in the TNIV translation given above. When I first glanced at this passage, I thought nothing of it. Then, I noticed that Calvin discusses it for about half of this concluding section. Apparently, this had generally been understood in the exegetical tradition before Calvin as denoting a church – called the bride of Christ, hence the feminine; called 'elect' or 'chosen,' hence the ecclesial referent. I'm prepared to accept this argument, and so was Calvin.

Furthermore, however, the reference to 'Babylon' was widely taken as an allusion to the city of Rome, and this Calvin refused to countenance. This might first strike one as odd, since the Reformers had the well-known habit of calling the pope 'antichrist' and the Roman church the 'whore of Babylon.' On the latter point, think of Luther's *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Still, the point that Roman exegetes got out of so identifying this allusion is that it allowed them to place Peter in Rome, and thus undergird the primacy of the pope. As Calvin explains, "This comment the Papists gladly lay hold on, that Peter may appear to have presided over the Church of Rome: nor does the infamy of the name [Babylon] deter them, provided they can pretend to the title of an apostolic seat; nor do they care for Christ, provided Peter be left to them. Moreover, let them only retain the name of Peter's chair, and they will not refuse to set Rome in the infernal regions" (154).

Aside from thinking that all this is clearly made up, Calvin disputes Eusebius and Jerome concerning Peter and Mark's biographies. His conclusion, "Since, then, Peter had Mark as his companion when he wrote this Epistle [WTM note: see verse 13], it is very probably that he was at Babylon: and this was in accordance with his calling; for we know that he was appointed an apostle especially to the Jews. He therefore visited chiefly those parts where there was the

greatest number of that nation" (155).

Well, there you have it. As the final page reads, "END OF THE FIRST EPISTLE OF PETER." Together, we have made it through 155 pages of Calvin's commentaries and, hopefully, benefited from engaging Scripture with him. Let's keep it up!